



# LONELY PARADE

FANNIE  
HURST



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Lonely parade

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## LONELY PARADE

*Books by*  
FANNIE HURST

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NOVELS

STARDUST

LUMMOX

APPASSIONATA

A PRESIDENT IS BORN

FIVE AND TEN

BACK STREET

IMITATION OF LIFE

ANITRA'S DANCE

GREAT LAUGHTER

SHORT STORIES

JUST AROUND THE CORNER

EVERY SOUL HATH ITS SONG

GASLIGHT SONATAS

HUMORESQUE

THE VERTICAL CITY

SONG OF LIFE

PROCESSION

*Fannie Hurst*

# LONELY PARADE

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I-2  
FIRST EDITION  
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*To*  
Charlotte Ames  
Kitty Mullane  
and  
Sierra Baldwin  
who were good  
but not good enough





## LONELY PARADE



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## PROLOGUE

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A SCENE was being enacted during the last fifteen minutes of the nineteenth century which doubtless had millions of counterparts in the hundred years that were about to conclude on this New Year's Eve of 1899.

The usualness of the thing that was happening to her did not, however, mitigate the arrow of pain in Sierra's heart, although before the first dawn of the new century had spread against her window, she was to lie in her wide bed in her wide room in a wide brownstone house on Madison Avenue, and try to apply the balm of that consoling thought to her hurting soul.

After all, it wasn't the first, and it would not be the last time, that one of a pair of sisters had been obliged to stand by, and see the other achieve the happiness she had coveted for herself.

Novels, poems, dramas, melodramas immemorial, had been wound around such a theme.

As a matter of fact, in the days when Sierra's mother had been spending a thousand dollars a week on Paris clothes and giving pails of champagne to her span of horses before her afternoon drive through the park, Sierra could recall that her mother had once remarked to her two little daughters—herself and her sister Florence—as they sat opposite her with their backs to the coachman and footman, that their father had originally been in love

with her sister Sweet, who, while riding at a rodeo, had been thrown and instantly killed.

At this time, which was long before the inroads on her mother's mentality had begun to seem alarming, it had occurred to small Sierra that the flamboyant woman twirling her parasol and eager to be the cynosure of all eyes, must have suffered flamboyantly during John Baldwin's courtship of this sister, Sweet.

As chimes began to tilt out the century, Sierra fell to wondering if she, these many years later, were not just repeating an old agony bequeathed to her by her mother, who, decades ago, in a mining town in the High Sierras, had suffered her siege of this same kind of anguish.

Except in her mother's case, fate in the form of a rodeo pony had intervened, flinging Sweet and breaking her back.

If there were any types of women more remote to her, and for that matter to her sister Florence, than her mother and this storied aunt Sweet, who had been the long-range shot of ten counties, then Sierra could not imagine it.

Yet here she was, having in common with the flamboyant but pitiful woman her mother, upon whom madness uncompromising, final and fatal had swooped one night, the same sense of denial that must have been Mamie Trehane's during the months when her sister Sweet was being wooed by John Baldwin.

It was almost the first sense of kinship she had ever felt with the outlandish mining camp woman, her mother, who simultaneously had been the laughingstock and character woman of New York, and those parts of Europe in which she had traveled in irrepressible magnificence during those first years that Baldwin's copper began to yield in millions.

Florence, blonder than her mother had been, china-eyed as her mother had been, blue and gold and pink as her mother had been, was a miniature and thoroughly devitalized version of the semiliterate Mamie Trehane, whose indiscretions of grammar, behavior and dress had set the whole town laughing.

Yet compared to the ivory-colored Sierra, with her large pale hands (pads of calm), her level eyes and her level lips, her sister Florence, standing fluttering beside Burleigh for the toast of their just announced troth, was immediately in their tragic mother's image.

How stranger than strange, considering the multiple interests Sierra shared with Burleigh, that he should be thus choosing to take her sister Florence in marriage.

The fact that Florence, with a mind as white as her voice, had no inkling that Sierra, high and mighty in her reserve as the mountain for which she was named, would even deign to look with favor upon just a nice darling boy like Burleigh, did not make it appreciably easier.

To be sure, Florence was three years younger, breezy in the bright blond way suggested by early portraits of their wild West mother, but lacking in all that high individualism and brain power, which, however crudely, had motivated much of her mother's defensive social clowning.

Good Lord, it must simply mean that Burleigh, despite what had seemed a profundity in his chosen work along social investigation lines, was something of a nitwit himself. That, or the law of the attraction of opposites was more than pseudo-scientific twaddle.

Florence and Burleigh, standing there side by side those last fifteen minutes of the century, while the news of their newly made and newly announced troth seemed to sparkle in the rococo old drawing room as the champagne sparkled in their raised glasses, were the traditional poles apart: Florence, a product of five boarding schools and no diplomas, short, blonde, and with the threat of future poundage already indicated in the charming flesh chirography of curves and dimples; Burleigh, tall, lean and with that caring look in his thirty-year-old eyes that Sierra had found provocative.

Putting her big slow smile across her face as you would a flower box along a window sill, Sierra did a figurative shrug of shoulders to herself. She did not intend this to mean, as Charlottenburg would mercilessly put it, that the blight of "love unrequited" was henceforth to lay its shadow across her life.

Her marriage with Burl, so it now and suddenly seemed to Sierra, would have been good and right and fulfilling. Their interests and their absorption in the settlement house where they had first met, the more than coincidental similarities of mind and temperament, to say nothing of the rush of her flesh into pinheads

when his hand touched hers, were precious stuff of human happiness.

Up to this moment of the bombshell of the announcement of this troth, Sierra had never allowed herself to think these concrete thoughts concerning him. But now suddenly an entire community of submerged hopes, dreams and desires lay in a heap, upheaved, upturned, as if an earthquake had shuddered through the last fifteen minutes of the nineteenth century, razing her plans of universe.

Probably now, with the pretty vacuity of Florence at his side, Burl would accept the opportunity the Foundation was offering him to do groundwork for the establishment of settlement houses in New Zealand. Florence's large fortune, about to come to her from a father who following his wife's recent death in her room of padded walls, had suddenly and surprisingly decided to make his ultimate disposals to his children during his lifetime, would not deter Burl. Missionary zeal shone in those fine dark eyes. Florence would not work at his side, but she would play at his side, like a kitten. She would be a good kitten, too relaxed, and perhaps too dull, for even the social aspirations of a well endowed young matron in a new setting. She would like, as she always had, the idea of living away from the Baldwin home in Murray Hill, whether at boarding school or now in New Zealand, as the case might be.

She would orient easily, eating her way, with those pretty white teeth of hers, into early and fleshy desuetude. Rapidly begetting children for Burl, Florence would remain her parsimonious little self, except where her children would be concerned. These, by way of overindulgence, she would probably rear into wastrels. A peculiar tightwad of a twenty-three-year-old girl, this Florence, sure to be as parsimonious of her prematurely inherited wealth as all her life she had been of her words, her confidences, and her relationship with the members of her family.

Would she make Burl happy? Would the warm little femaleness of her suffice? Probably. More, no doubt, than the compatibility of mind and purpose she, Sierra, would have brought him. Obviously, or he need not have chosen it this way.

It was not the first time Sierra had been struck broadside in this fashion. Never before, it is true, so crashingly as this, at

least so it seemed now. But there had been men, at least three, whom she conceivably would have married, but who, as in the case of Burl, fraternized with her, but in the end married girls who had not it in them to meet or tolerate men on this fraternizing basis.

In each of the preceding cases her realizations had come no less bitterly than now.

In the first instance, when she was only sixteen, it had not been until Cecelia Harrington, with whom Sierra had prepared for Bryn Mawr at Greenwich Seminary, and Robert Clark, instructor at the Seminary, had confided to her their intention of eloping, that the heart-constricting realization had raced over the pale, serious Sierra, that her dreams of future had been intricately bound up in Robert Clark.

The sharp frustration of this had thwarted her determination to enter Bryn Mawr, detouring her instead into fierce postgraduate activities that ranged from leather tooling to bookbinding. Ultimately the teaching of this latter in a settlement house had been her springboard into social work.

Next, one of the eminent neurologists who had attended her mother, and for many years following her incarceration in an institution had remained a visiting friend of the family's, had appealed to her pity so deeply that she believed herself in love with him. An iron-faced widower, old enough to be her young grandfather, tired to the bone, but with beautiful tender hands, he had ultimately married his secretary and died the following night while listening to the heart of a patient.

Then a business associate of her father's, a young fellow by the delightful name of Hame O'Toole, red-eyed and red-haired, whose father, deceased, had prospected with hers, had unknowingly inflicted his share of frustration. To O'Toole, who never permitted the right side of his life to see the type of women with whom he consorted on his left, Sierra, and for that matter, Florence, whom he would have liked to pinch, remained untouchables. When this boisterous fellow had married one of his pleasure ladies in her three-tiered upper West Side apartment, he had subsequently receded into a social limbo which eliminated his habit of Sunday dinner at the house of his father's partner in Murray Hill.

Sierra was eighteen when this happened. Rudderless, trying to



run her father's large household which was careening even more than when her mother's erratic hand had been at the helm, the marriage of O'Toole blasted her subconscious processes into alive awareness that she had been in love with him.

As for O'Toole, he had never dared even to parry with Baldwin's cool, frighteningly chaste-looking daughter Sierra, nor allowed his desire to pinch Florence the slightest concession. Baldwin's worse than motherless girls, of a stripe he had never known, were anathema to him because their type led to ultimate entrapment.

Who, much less O'Toole, would have dreamed that a dandy mad moll such as their mother had been, even if she ultimately landed in the bughouse, could have begot two such dead cats.

On the other hand, the old man, even now after he was broken and half broke, considering what his fortune had once been, was still a good egg. But the gals, reasoned O'Toole, must have been swapped in the cradle. Didn't belong to a pap who was once "Pay-Dirt Dick," of the old Sierra days, or to the most buxom hash slinger that ever handed it across the counter of a boom mining town. The mother who bore these girls had made the Sierras ring with good old Anglo-Saxon jargon she wasn't afraid to unloose. Their ma might have gotten the ha-ha when she came East with her new millions; that must be what made these girls carry their tails between their legs; but Mamie Baldwin had made them sit up! More ginger in her little finger than in both of her gals put together. Too much ginger had driven her bughouse, had ripped her roof off, but *there* had been a woman for you!

Deeply beneath the startled realizations which O'Toole's marriage had awakened within her, Sierra knew all this. Nevertheless, seeing the ebullient red-headed O'Toole, gay as the tassel on a cornstalk, recede into a nether world with a woman who turned out to bear a remarkable resemblance to her own mother, clapped another story onto the structure of Sierra's mounting realization that something as inseparable as her personality was proving a barrier.

And so Clark, and so O'Toole, and so now Burl! Here in the case of Burl was compatibility that made her feeling for him a virtue rather than something over which she secretly rebelled. If

the nap of her emotions rose at thought of him and her mind felt quickened and excited by the compatibility of their interests, it was also something more than that. Burl's passionate dedication of self and his capacity to care deeply and personally about the sordid problems of poverty, disease, maladjustment and worse that hourly passed before his somber eyes, was as dauntless, as tireless, as immediate as her own.

Burl would never shrink into the professional social worker's detachment. To him, the causes behind a wife's blackened eye were not just a matter of a spouse's most recent drunk. Burl's caring mind probed deeper. Supplying a family money for the day's coal, did not ease him concerning its general plight, and the spectacle of the city slum through which he daily walked to the settlement house kept his indignation roiling, not only as a slum in particular, but as a humiliating reminder of society's colossal failure. Oftentimes, as these same problems began to roost on her nightly pillow, Sierra, lying wakeful, could visualize Burl, just as if he were lying there beside her, also wakeful and brooding over the immense toll of human suffering exacted by poverty and its consequences.

The thought sent hot flashings through her—it was that kind of compatibility. The mind and the spirit. The spirit and the flesh! And now the pale soft flesh of Florence, and the flesh alone, had come between the dark compassionate eyes of Burl and herself.

It was not that she did not have it in her to rise from the ashes of these last fifteen minutes of 1899. She would. She could. Only, what was all this portending? Time and time again, life was brushing her by, like a figure hurrying past in the dark.

And she was in her twenties, brainier and at least no less personable than Florence, who was marrying Burl; certainly more so than sallow Cecelia who had married Clark.

She had never laid eyes on the present Mrs. O'Toole, married these several years and residing with her gay Irishman in the three-tiered gilt limbo. Florence had seen her once walking with O'Toole, who had hastily crossed the street to avoid a meeting. Her description of a washed-out, pock-marked blonde had cut deeply into something tender in Sierra. In his halting announcement of his forthcoming marriage, O'Toole had illustrated his

lady's fortitude of character by describing her trip to Vicksburg to nurse an old aunt through smallpox. In the high embarrassment of his dinner table announcement, he had tried to define, by way of anecdote, her generosity of spirit and purse.

Undoubtedly, in O'Toole's lady was something reminiscent of the mother of Sierra and Florence, whose florid presence had vanished into sanitarium retreat before they were old enough to more than sense its meaning.

The present Mrs. O'Toole, owing to the implications that went with her, would not dare attempt to cut any such swathe as the young Mrs. Baldwin, out of the West, with her newly made millionaire husband who had literally dug for his ore.

But just as there had been something indefinably grand about her fantastic follies, so was there grandeur to the present Mrs. O'Toole.

It was less humiliating to have been passed by for Mrs. O'Toole than for Cecelia or for Florence.

She wondered what her father would have thought, had she dared confide to him so strange a conclusion.

It had been long since she had treated him with anything stiffer than tenderness for his tiredness and receding lust for life. He would doubtless have mutely regarded her with his vague and troubled eyes, which always reminded her of the eyes of a caged and aging bear which had been born out of captivity.

It was a strange unorthodox thought for her to be admitting to herself. Yes, better to have been passed by for Mrs. O'Toole than for Florence, whose body was so soft and yielding and whose generosity turned on like a tight spigot.

Standing there in the tasseled drawing room in the house on Murray Hill, with its curvatures of black walnut furniture, bay windows, filled with growing greenery; drape-festooned archways and gilded pier glasses, Sierra, even before she could retreat upstairs to the haven of her wide bed and wide room, was facing herself with the bitter and oft-repeated question: Why? Why Clark, then O'Toole, and now Burl?

The very self-query made her feel too large-boned, too long in the thigh, too tall. Not exactly tall in the flesh—she was five foot six—but what might be termed, too tall in personality.

It must be some sort of tallness of that figurative kind which

prompted her vast friend, the Charlottenburg, to refer to her as high Sierra.

Inside, she often felt small and as twirled about as a half-drowned mouse at the foot of the High Sierras in whose shadow she had been born.

Her father was about to propose a toast and one hand was stealing backward behind the tail of his frock coat, waggling it.

Even with the vitality long since drained out of him by way of the indoor-and-desk conformity of a man who had prospected for ore across the western face of America for the first thirty years of his life, there still remained something of John Baldwin the miner; something of the thickness of a fine bull. Depth, height and spread were still those of a man whose heft had been achieved by swing of ax and trek across untamed country.

Sierra, who remembered many crackling sayings of a mother notorious for her malapropos explosions, recalled a visit to a tailor with her parents, when she could not have been more than six, and hearing the astonishing figure in plush and willow plumes observe to the fitter as he measured the submissive figure of John Baldwin: "Built like a wardrobe, isn't he! There is room inside my husband for his liver and lights to hang comfortably."

Although she had been seeing her father against the background of this miscellaneous arcade of a drawing room ever since she had crawled and toddled along its floors, it never seemed to Sierra that he belonged there any more than a park statue dragged in from a public square would have belonged in the soft imprisonment of drapery and body-warmed plush.

To Sierra, even after the onus had descended upon interiors designed as opulently as the high-busted figures of its Victorian ladies, this drawing room retained a sort of voluptuous beauty. A Lillian Russell of a room. A Mamie Baldwin of a room.

A famed architect, who was to die in one of the most notorious fracases in the history of champagne New York, had designed and personally supervised this ponderously handsome dwelling in Murray Hill, during the year-long absence of Mamie and John Baldwin on a round-the-world second honeymoon. From London, where by way of her astonishing performances of engaging an entire floor of the Savoy for herself and husband, and driving

through Hyde Park in a coach and four, willow plumes blowing, she became laughingstock overnight, Mamie Baldwin had furnished the house in New York.

An eminent firm of decorators to his Majesty, given *carte blanche*, had collaborated with the American architect in a spectacular pact to have the house in Murray Hill completed, down to chicken in the oven and fires in the grates, by the date of the return of the struck-it-rich young westerners from their heralded travels.

Early compatibility had established itself between Sierra and this substantial pile, which enclosed an odor of *de luxe* stuffiness perpetually pleasant to her. Life in it was somewhat the equivalent of a child's trip through the fantastic caves of a pleasure park. Its crystal chandeliers tinkled if you created a draught or reached up toward them. Swirls and loops of fringed drapes into which a small girl could disappear for a glimpse out onto the street scene of Madison Avenue, covered the windows. Come night in this great gas-lighted prism of a house, a child, who had played most of the day beside her sister Florence, yet not with her, laid herself down in a bed as wide as a raft, in a room that overlooked a plane tree and the handsome brownstone flank of the house next door.

It was as square and as big, this house, as her father who had square fingernails and square-toed shoes and square shoulders. Paradoxically, it was also full of curved, high-bosomed furniture, ornate surfaces that reflected with a subtle sort of devilishness the warmth and terribleness of Mamie Baldwin.

As the skilled painter catches the inner meaning of his subject and flecks it on in the curve of a lip or the droop of an eyelid, so, somehow, had the decorators to his Majesty captured in the residence of the Baldwins in Murray Hill some of the hilarious and obvious handsomeness, some of the high-bosomed voluptuousness, some of the irrepressible *gaucherie* that had been Mamie Trehane's.

In thirty years the stamp of all this had gone down into the personality of the brownstone box of a house. The upholstery held the print of Baldwin heads; the timbers held the rapid talk of a woman who had gone stark raving mad; the monotonous talk of a man who had become a carbon copy of himself, and the

soprano chatter of two girl-children, as different, one from the other, as their parents had been different one from the other.

Memories of the cries of her mother, who toward the end had torn sheets with her teeth and bitten the backs of her own hands; memories of the night crying of a brother who had died in babyhood; memories of the deathly sweetness of the fair-haired child, Florence; of herself who could feel so still as she sat, of a stiff Sunday afternoon, in this very room, were as alive in Sierra as a fire in a grate.

One of the few occasions when John Baldwin still went down to his cups was New Year's Eve, when he committed the annual atavism of becoming the old John Baldwin of those uproarious days when gold had gleamed in his dreams, and gold was the radiant blondness of Mamie Trehane of Silvertown, the toast of mining camps for hundreds of miles around.

He was about to break now into a toast, he who had not toasted, except on New Year's Eve, since those years when, along with all of Silvertown, he used to drink in corn whisky to Mamie of the Sierras. It was his habit, these latter New Year's Eves, ever since the storied days when Mamie's attempts at social occasions had petered out, to take his stand before the marble fireplace, which Kitty Mullane once characterized as the Baldwin's drawing room false teeth, and, glass in hand, strike out in key of oratory. He was about to do it now, with only Burl, Florence, herself and Carrie, whom the Charlottenburg called the he-butler, moving about with a tray of glasses.

Oh, to be with Kitty and the Charlottenburg tonight, instead of letting herself in for her father when he was high. The need for them, after this hit across the heart, smote Sierra and smote her.

Suddenly life was—well, if not bitter, it had no taste. You wanted to spit it out.

And to think that earlier in that same waning day it had mattered to her that the red candles on the Christmas tree were burned down, or that her share in her father's estate, which he was bequeathing to his daughters during his lifetime, would not be legally hers until after the twenty-fifth anniversary of the settlement house.

Earlier that same day she had had it in her to desire with zest.

It would have meant a great deal to be in a position to make the settlement house a handsome gift on its twenty-fifth birthday. Not for worlds would she have asked her father for an advance. He was not easy in such matters. Generous enough in the last analysis, but factual and conservative. It had seemed, an hour or two earlier in the year, almost beyond her patience to have to wait through the legal shenanigans that would ultimately make her independent mistress of her inheritance. Seated in the midst of this new numbness following the announcement of Florence and Burl, it did not matter now.

Back there, two hours earlier in the dying century, it had seemed important, despite her preference to be with Kitty and the Charlottenburg, to remain at home and watch out 1899 in the lushness of this drawing room with its Sargent portrait of her mother, overripe in tomato-colored velvet, and her mother's Carrara favorite, "The Sunbonnet Girl," in pinked marble lace, a glaring chromo on its pedestal between the windows.

Here she was, caught sharply, as it were, in the midst of a celebration with that more and more recurring sense of her inability to go on. They were something to fight against, these lack-luster moods of defeat. That was why her growing friendship with Kitty and the Charlottenburg amounted to a need to wrap it about her life, as if it were a shawl, and deaden this chill. Kitty and the Charlottenburg, with all their flair for robust living were, along with herself, members of that class of women whose lives did not come off, so to speak. There must be times when they, even as she herself, sat on the edge of living, contemptuous of its Florences, yet somehow strangely frustrated by them. She wondered.

Some day perhaps, when this exciting new friendship with them was farther along, she might learn. To be sure, the lives of these astonishing creatures, however else they might turn out to be, were not going to be pedestrian. They were too zestful for that. They were a pair of daring youngish women on a high trapeze known as life. They would swing far and wide. Well, for that matter, Sierra's own work too, would—indeed must—swing her into new ethers.

Why, it was only day before yesterday, after a staff meeting

at the settlement house, that Burl had walked her all the way home from Fourth Street, talking their mutual dreams of work. They had strode along through the frowning reality of slums, this somber son out of New England, and this equally somber young woman, who seemed so irrelevantly begot of a father who, born in New England, had drifted west, made his fantastic fortune, and married it to the toast of Silvertown. The burden of these slums had lain across their swinging shoulders, hers and Burl's, as they had hurried through the dusk, side by side, their idealisms and social urge identical.

It had seemed to her then, and she had blushed in the dusk, that there was no valid reason, not even the nature of her mother's protracted illness, why she and Burl, aided and abetted by the not inconsiderable fortune which John Baldwin was about to make over to each of his daughters, could not together move forward into married lives dedicated to warfare against slum misery.

Mankind, they had agreed on that walk home, had slipped somewhere in its distribution of human rights. There was neither peace, nor dignity, nor freedom worthy of the great democracy of America, in the poverty-stricken lives of the human beings they encountered daily in the settlement.

Their faces, high and bright, had been thrust ahead. The Augean stables of slums and poverty and disease and worse, were not insuperable obstacles. They could and must be cleaned. Their young heads and hearts and idealisms were not afraid.

How long ago that day before yesterday now seemed. It had been snowing a bit, hard, icelike particles, star shapes that hung on the lashes. She had seen him through those stars, herself beside him, their hard-working, dreaming, achieving, alleviating future laid out in her mind's eye. She thought of him at her side, her literal bedside, if you will, and now here he stood, his sculptured head outlined against the paneled walls, side by side with Florence.

Old design, that of two sisters and a man. Old and immemorably bitter.

It left her, this design, as alone in her spirit as a figure seated on a rock against a sky. Actually, though, she would not be entirely alone. There was her father, whom Kitty was pleased to call a vanishing American, the type who had gone seeking first-hand wealth with pickax and placer pan, and had found.



It was incongruous that a wardrobe of a man such as her father, whose mighty hands still bore coloration from the calluses of the pickaxes he had swung forty years before, should have the small velvet voice of a man who had never known a beard. Members of his family, his boards of directors, servants, wore strained listening looks, or cupped their ears, when he spoke.

The listening look of a Baldwin, straining to hear what the old gentleman was saying, came into Sierra's eyes.

"... It becomes fitting tonight," he was announcing in his small white voice, as he teetered before the fireplace, hands locked beneath his coattails, "it becomes fitting, although I had not planned it, since Leonore is in Lakewood, helping her stepson recuperate from gripe . . ."

Leonore? What on earth had Leonore Boardman to do with it?

Suddenly something premonitory shot through Sierra. And her mother dead only two months! And yet, why not! For fifteen years Mamie Baldwin had been more than dead. Everything warm and sweet within Sierra rushed toward her father, hemming and hawing there. Could Father be meaning he was going to marry Leonore Boardman!

"You and Burl have put your matter very nicely, Florence. If Burl had the nature to carry on my affairs, it would suit me, but I am not the man to dicker with fate if she deals a nice hand instead of a four-flush. You are about to be independent in money matters. You are free, white, and over twenty-one. What you have missed in the influence of a mother these many years you are entitled to make up for in your choice of a husband."

"Oh, Father," sobbed Florence, whose tears had long since lost potency because they could be invoked on the slightest provocation, "I'm not leaving you. I'm bringing you Burl."

That was nonsense. That was Florence's banal and ridiculous blarney and nonsense. She had never been with him. The house on Madison Avenue had been her reluctant headquarters between changes of schools, trips to Europe and visits to the homes of school friends, reciprocated by way of expensive gifts instead of return invitations. She was not bringing him Burl. She was not bringing him anything. She was taking, as she had always taken. And yet, poor child, small wonder! Bereft of the erratically indulgent mother who had put the stamp of ridiculousness on it

thirty years back, the vast home had survived as a sort of fancy mausoleum for memories of the former chatelaine of Silvertown's Greasy Spoon Lunch Room.

Guests with names in the Social Register, which had been so frantically thumbed over by the social secretaries engaged by Mamie Baldwin, had finally accepted invitations to dinners and balls in that home, as curiosity-bitten as if they were availing themselves of tickets to see a talking dog or an Ubangi family.

Cruel laughter lurked in the timbers of the house in Murray Hill. Two little girls in long ruffled nightdresses and artificially fuzzed hair, had leaned over the balustrade, Florence with the look of vicariously licking her smug little chops, Sierra, quiet and incongruous as a nun in a laughing gallery.

There was one gala night when the canvas was stretched across the sidewalk and Welsbach and candlelight poured upon the scene, which Sierra could recall with a clarity that italicized every detail, as if she were regarding her memories through a magnifying glass.

Herself and Florence, in their overfancy nightdresses, peering through the balusters, and by virtue of their elevation, so close to the crystal chandeliers which lighted the lower floors that they could have reached through the spokes and touched the iridescent beauties which held the light in all the colors of the spectrum.

There, through the banisters, was their father, standing much as he was now before the fireplace, younger, less gray, but already beginning to lose the sands of zest for life, as if he were an hourglass with them running through him, as he teetered back and forth with his hands beneath his dress coattails. Beside him, brilliant as the Statue of Liberty on fire, blazoned their mother, who three days later was to slip in the bathtub, causing the brain injury that was to banish her terrible brightness from their scene forever.

Something downstairs had gone hilariously wrong. Sierra was never to know just what, although she suspected that it had to do with her mother's precarious jeweled shoulder strap. Bound up in her tortured memory of that night was an immense spill of one deep white and globular breast over the bodice of her mother's red velvet gown. Curves had burst their restraint. Ludicrously, and due to no fault of the hostess, a waiter carrying a tray of filled champagne glasses had slid at this horrific instant

down half the length of a polished floor, landing on his posterior, but maintaining his tray of exquisite vintage intact. Hilarity, hitherto more cautiously suppressed, burst its restraint then, leaping through the house in a conflagration of hysterical laughter.

"Feel my cheeks, how hot they are," Sierra remembered her small sister whispering to her during their forbidden vantage on the stairway.

"Feel mine, how cold," the pale little girl in the straight bangs had replied.

Down there, beside the same fireplace before which her father now stood, he had also stood that night beside his wife, the pair of them cruelly isolated from their crowd of guests, Mamie Baldwin waving an ostrich fan half her height and kicking constantly at the train of the velvet gown which wrapped and revealed her curves.

Effulgent was the word for Mamie Baldwin. Her two small daughters, accustomed as they were to her blaze, were nevertheless regarding her between the balusters with saucer eyes of amazement fastened on the precarious shoulder straps.

And then when it happened, and the cascade of white flesh, which Sierra remembered had been warm and sweet to her little cheek, had come cascading; the titters which ran through the crowded rooms of bare-necked women and stiff-shirted men had been like cold water squeezed from a huge sponge over her body. Titters and worse! Directly beneath the staircase, two of the guests spoke in the cruel carrying sibilance of the whisper:

"You women folks are the very devil to each other. Why don't some of you get together and save that animated plush sofa, stuffed with pay dirt, from giving the town stitches in the side?"

"Don't be silly, Arthur. It isn't once in a generation that you get a laughingstock, a Mrs. Malaprop, and peerless Heidsick champagne vintage in one hilarious package. What this town needs is a Mamie Baldwin to give it what Willie Collier inelegantly calls a good 'belly laugh.'"

"Were those two youngsters hanging over the banisters theirs?"

"Yes. The taller one is named after the Rocky Mountains or Grand Canyon or something. Looks like a little medieval saint, doesn't she?"

"Strange offspring for this pair. The little plump one does bear

some remote resemblance to her fancy maw, but the little Joan of Arc with the bangs and straight Indian face was surely changed in the cradle."

"She's her mother's daughter all right, but God was merciful and threw away the mold in which he made ma. Pa is apparently too overpowered by the awfulness of ma to do anything about anything, except shrink into his millions. He may have found the combination that opened up the copper vaults of the Sierras, but the poor fellow looks as if he would sell out for a dime."

"He reminds me of a locust that has shed its shell."

"Only John Baldwin is the shell part."

"Well, anyway, every time Mamie Baldwin opens her mouth, she gives the town a belly laugh."

"Yes, but what about the locust that has shed its shell and the two little girls who refuse to inherit anything from the parents except their millions?"

"God help them, especially the one that looks as if she was born in Assisi where St. Francis fed the little birds."

"How frightful of their mama to spill out of herself at such an elegant party!"

"Frightful for Miss Assisi if ma doesn't fall downstairs into eternity, before the youngster begins to get on to the fact that if she wasn't changed in the cradle, she ought to have been."

Less than a week later, ma almost did fall into eternity, by way of the serious injury to her head from the crash in the bathtub, which was to confine her, for the next fifteen years of her life, in a room with padded walls.

That New Year's Eve of fifteen years before, etched sharply on the retina of Sierra's eye and against her memory, was before her now, her father standing there on the hearth as he had that evening beside her mother. So, here, now, all the years later, there still lingered in her memory the voices of the two guests beneath the stairs, as they had floated up to the ears of the small girl peering between the balusters.

Like the food she had eaten during all the subsequent years, like the air she had breathed, the sunshine she had felt, that babyish experience in humiliation had helped to make her into the kind of person who now, so many years later, sat listening to her father. She was branded with old memories just as her father so

often seemed to her to be erased by his, faded, receding as it were into a grayness which would ultimately blot him out completely.

Well, now this mother whom neither she nor Florence had been permitted even to see during the long dark night of her living death, was actually dead these sixty days and her child Florence, whose birth pains she had endured, but whose existence she had forgotten, was about to set out on her adventure of marriage.

You did not go through the motions of mourning the passing of a woman whose release was a blessing to all concerned. Fervently, Sierra hoped that her father, hemming and hawing there, was not about to go through them. God alone knew what he must have suffered on his weekly visits to the "sanitarium," which had contained what was left of the effulgent Mamie Trehane of Silvertown, or how scarified his heart and soul by the long years of her ferocious insanity. But all the more reason not to delay by one moment the dash of Florence and Burl after happiness which could be so fugitive.

Pity rose high in her for Florence and Burl standing there needing blessings of reassurance for the years ahead.

Heirs to pain, one and all. Pity for even the best of them was part of her own pain.

". . . and your announcement tonight, children, makes it fitting for me to touch upon what is a serious matter for us all."

What in heaven's name!

"Father," cried Florence, also sensing something to be warded off, her small lisp almost visible upon her lips, "it'll be midnight in fourteen minutes!"

"One time is as good as another for facing facts. I hope you and Sierra and Burl are going to think them good facts. I do. I include you, Burl, because you're eligible now to a family discussion, even if parts of it have to be a bit painful, where it touches on—the mother of your fiancée."

A look of terror blanched the blue-eyed face of Florence and beneath the skirt of her severely plain gray evening dress, the long legs of Sierra shot forward.

"Father, must you?" she asked in her low plush voice.

"Yes," he replied, teetering and scratching his head. "No time

like the present. Especially after what we have just heard from Florence and Burl."

In the tired, gray, conforming man on the hearth was little to suggest the son of a miner and a Cape Cod schoolteacher, who forty years before had hacked rock and prospected for ore in one gold rush after another. But to Sierra, even discounting the fact that there was wine in his head, her father was strangely alive with something that had long since lain low if not dead within him. His reference to Leonore Boardman came flashing back to her. The day that the notice of her mother's death had appeared in the newspapers, Leonore had appeared at the house in Murray Hill.

Inadvertently, Sierra recalled, her father, who was seeing no one, had encountered her in a lower hall as he was passing from room to room, and she had laid a quick hand of sympathy on his arm and followed him into the library.

Could it be?

He was smiling now, his anxious eyes moving from one to the other of his daughters, most frequently, however, and most anxiously, in the direction of Sierra, and then to Burl.

"Florence has of course told you, Burl, that her mother was hopelessly invalided for about fifteen years before her death."

"Burl knows everything, Father," cried Florence in her high and ready-to-be-hysterical voice. "It's New Year's Eve. It's our betrothal. Don't let Father bring things up, Sierra," shrilled Florence and began to cry softly into the palms in which she buried her face.

Quick to hand her his handkerchief, Burl bent his body in a protective cave over the chair of his fiancée, driving home to Sierra a sensation that had come to be strangely repetitive. That of having a door closed softly and politely in her face. How well she knew it. The closing of the doors, softly.

"Father, won't it keep, since it's upsetting to Florence, until after the New Year?"

"No, because when Leonore returns from Lakewood, we are going to be married."

It struck Sierra, along with other irrelevancies, such as the fact that her sister's face looked exactly as if it were swimming up-

turned beneath water, that simultaneously with her father's statement, the cannell fire in the grate gave a loud cackle.

As for herself, a spurt of the most reckless relief smote her.

(Now I can go live with Kitty and the Charlottenburg. We can buy the house in Fifty-third Street!)

"... agree with me that after all these years of conditions brought about by your mother's—er—ah—illness, I am justified in wanting to salvage those that are still left to me with a woman like Leonore. With you and Florence soon to receive your full inheritances, you are as financially secure as if I were dead."

So Leonore Boardman was the reason her father had so precipitously decided upon this method of providing for his daughters! Leonore Boardman! And what of Oliver Plow! For that matter, what of Leonore Boardman, well-born, well-bred and even though old enough to be real mother to her stepson Oliver Plow, girlish in manner and apparently untarnished by the financial reverses which seemed to dog her step, marriage after marriage. And now, once more, by her tried way of marriage, Leonore was about to recoup prosperity for herself and Oliver, this time by way of John Baldwin. Poor dear, if it wasn't the admirable way, neither was it the easy way. John Baldwin, empty as a cocoon of zest for life, was not exactly the dream of a zestful woman such as Leonore.

"I hope you see it this way, Sierra. It's fair enough, isn't it?"

"Yes, Father, if it means your happiness."

"And you too, Florence?"

With a frightening suddenness, Florence fell into hysteria.

"No. No. No! Not so soon after Mother. Burl and I are going to wait a year. You must too! And not Leonore Boardman, Father. What she's after is security! She's never been lucky at getting it for herself and Oliver Plow. Where do you come in, keeping Leonore Boardman's and Oliver Plow's bread buttered? Besides, she's old New York, and you—we—I've never pretended to Burl—we're what we are. She wouldn't wipe her shoes on us, much less marry into us, if she didn't smell money! And Mother scarcely cold, before she dares to sit herself and her stepson, with whom she is notoriously in love, right here in this house. Oh, Father! Oh, Father—I don't know what—I don't know—what—Burl—Sierra—I—I—it's too much—I can't stand—it——"

Suddenly the commotion was all around Florence, Burl already

master of the soothing sounds he would probably make all through his married life stooping beside her, John Baldwin appalled at the stricken form of his daughter, and on the edge of the commotion, calm in her sense of the right of her father to end his days with Leonore Boardman, Sierra, untouched, unpetted.

"Father has a right to his way of life, Florence," she said from the side lines. "You've asserted yours."

The rosy figure in the chair began to sob against the coat of her fiancé, lifting her streaming eyes to his.

"Not with Mother scarcely put away. We're waiting our year, aren't we, Burl? Besides, Leonore Boardman is old and tired of trying to live the bright life with Oliver, on nothing a year. She knows Father is security for her and her—her—call him whatever you will—her lover, I guess ——"

Suddenly, resounding through the talk and sobs, John Baldwin, who never raised his voice, much less his hand, let it fly resoundingly against the wet cheek of his daughter, releasing an instant scene of hurry, confusion and screaming hysteria.

With angry protective gesture, Burl caught the hand of his future father-in-law, as Sierra mashed him down into his chair.

It was a tableau of horror, even Florence pausing stockstill in the midst of her immense orgy of immense sobs, to stare with wet incredulous eyes at the still upraised hand of her father.

"Father, you're not yourself," said Sierra, continuing to press him down into his chair, "or you wouldn't have done that."

His gray face whipped by the gale of what had taken sudden possession of him, the stocky body threw off their hold of him with a wrench. Like a bull charging, he rushed across the room toward the bookshelves, his head low, his breathing audible, his usually quiet eyes focusing crazily.

"You can't fill my eyes with the hogwash women talk among themselves. What's left of my life, such as it is, is mine, and to hell with all the pigsty lies of women about women. You could fill your sister Sierra's ears with pitch, but it wouldn't stick. It does to yours and has, since your tattletale days. To hell with it! You're going to listen, now that you've got your pick of happiness out of life, to what I've had out of mine. Goddam years of it that I've protected you girls from, and rightly. Goddam years of



a living death of fifty-two visits a year out there to a living hell ——”

Fumbling frenziedly along the bookshelves that lined the south wall of the room, the moth-colored figure of John Baldwin shot completely outside his control. His knees knocked and the trembling of his body rippled his suit.

“Father,” cried Sierra, rushing after him, her hand out to restrain him, “don’t fly apart this way. Florence didn’t mean ——”

“I did. I did. I did,” shrilled Florence, beating with her clenched fists against the upholstery of the divan. “I did. Mother’s not cold yet. What will people say! Leonore Boardman is in love with her stepson. It’s been common talk for years. Burl knows it; Oliver Plow went to school with him. I do mean it. I mean every word of it!”

Hurling books from the shelves as if they were bricks, John Baldwin, his wet lips moving, threw off Sierra’s repeatedly restraining hand.

“You’re going to listen. It’s just as well to get it out! All of you now, here, tonight, by God, are going to listen.”

“But, Father, why are you tearing books off the shelves in that fashion? Stop it, Father, stop it.”

“Here they are! I snapped them the week before she died. I wanted her to die! Day and night I wanted her to die. I prayed to God not to want it, because even after fifteen years, there were a couple of the specialists said there was hope. I prayed to God and it didn’t help. I wanted her to die. It was like visiting an animal every week.”

“Father!”

“I spared you. I took it alone. Hell, that’s what it was, maniac hell. And when it wasn’t maniac, it was—it was worse! She used to wait for me, your poor, your wretched mother, when it wasn’t maniac. It was enough to tear the heart, soul and liver out of a man. It was her wanting me. Dammit, I’m finished protecting you from it. She was a woman wanting me. Fifteen years of it. Maniac one day, female the next! Maniac. Female.”

“Father,” screamed Florence, clinging to Burl. “Father!”

“Listen, you! Listen, you! I wanted her to die. It wasn’t wrong to want poor Mamie to die, but I kept being afraid for wanting her to die. It wasn’t the thought of other women drove me to

wanting it. All this was long before I had thoughts of Leonore. But I wanted what was left of my life. I'm a God-fearing man, or I'd not have been afraid of wanting it. I wanted her to die, and for wanting her to die, losses in business, bad times, depressions, meant nothing to me. Outside of security for my daughters, living, breathing, eating, drinking, meant nothing. I couldn't think or act or be, for wanting her to die—wanting her to die!"

Snatching up a sheaf of wrapped cardboard which his frenzied fingers unearthed from behind a row of books, he ripped open the package, revealing several large photographs which he thrust upward, fanwise.

"I wanted her to die! I took these pictures and had them enlarged so that when I looked at them it would not seem too devilish to wish her dead. Now you look! Look at them as I have looked at the living reality for fifteen years. Look, do you hear me, look! Don't turn your head! You'll look as I've looked. Look, and then dare to deny me the right to what is left. Look! Look!"

There she was, Mamie Trehane, toast of Silvertown, caught in dreadful action, photographed skulking in her den; peering slyly from behind her jungle of unkempt hair; gnawing a beef bone with ferocity; grinning with spittle along her mouth. There she was again and again; she who had been Mamie Trehane, the lusty beauty of boom towns, in all of her dreadful defeat. Loose-mouthed, haggard as a hag, lecherous-eyed Mamie, who had nurtured her young at what had once been the rich round fount of those breasts, a woman of no breasts now. The flesh that had once been white as if lacquered, hung now in wattles; so did the hair in clumps, and always at the corners of the lips, the pouring drool, from what had once been the beautiful and fruity mouth of a mother who had bent over the cribs of her little girls for the loving good-night kisses she never failed to shower upon them.

"Look, and reproach me if you dare! Look, or I'll rub your eyes in it. Look, I tell you. Look!"

Suddenly, as the door swung open to reveal Carrie with a loaded champagne tray, the cacophonous greetings to the new century began to spill from chimes and bells, horns, catcalls, shouts, sirens, elongated steamboat whistles from the harbor, spraying and braying sound as they mounted to heaven in rocket after rocket of dissonance.

1900! The twentieth century!

Quietly, in the midst of it, Sierra walked over to her father, wrenched the fan of portraits from his fingers, laid them face down on the piano, and cupping his head against her breast, held him as you would a child.

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## CHAPTER I

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THE structure of the friendship of Sierra Baldwin, Katherine Mullane and Charlotte Praag Ames (more generally known by that far-fetched derivative of her first name, "The Charlottenburg") was a sort of triptych, its center the spreading friarlike figure of Miss Ames, flanked by the Gothic panels of Sierra and Kitty.

More than a quarter of a century later, Jean Vegi-Vegi, a notoriously prominent member of a school calling itself surrealist, whom the Charlottenburg was to foist on a goggle-eyed American public, was to paint a portrait of the trio in that design: the Charlottenburg, even before her mounting poundage had made her Buddha-like, seated on a chair which she completely obscured, her immense legs spread, the wide white face concentrating every expression in the puckish eyes.

The righthand, flying buttress of the triptych contained a Kitty so appallingly slimmed that she seemed less than one-half her actual slender proportions. What was to make this portrait locally, at least, as storied as the stolen Mona Lisa, were the gloved hands which drooped over the edges of the chair arms, their twelve-inch fingers, incredibly, just clearing the floor.

"Kitty's grabby fingers," interpreted the beholders.

True, somewhere in this travesty of a travesty, you strangely

caught the affectations, the little greeds, the cerebral frivolities, the flinty kittenishness of an adorable personality whom you rejected with your mind and took in with your pores. The portrait regarded you with a straight face, practically forcing you to look back with yours, straight. Kitty faced life like that, absurdities masked, even to herself, in seriousness of purpose. In the left panel some of the artist's admixture of dementia praecox and mischievousness seemed to have concentrated upon a small object resembling an overripe tomato painted into a lower corner of the panel. Entirely dissociated from this tomato-like object, the profile figure of Sierra, easily recognizable although the face was turned out of the picture, strode her panel in the direction of space, her severely tailored skirt manipulated so that it had a bisected look and fell into the line of a trouser.

It must have some meaning besides silliness, said the many who were to pass before this picture.

Back there at the turn of the century in a world of How old is Ann? Boer War, shirtwaist, the Man from Home, Remember the Maine; with Woodrow Wilson at Princeton; Herbert Hoover in China; Theodore Roosevelt, Governor of New York, the surrealism school was little more than an unpleasant effluvium, about to ooze out of the miasmic stream of consciousness of an art not yet born.

Twenty years later, the Charlottenburg was to virtually assist at its accouchement, because the young French-American, Jean Vegi-Vegi (the idea for the repetition was Kitty's) who was to paint the triptych, was to be not only the earliest articulate disciple of the inarticulate school, but a protégé of the Charlottenburg's as well.

Something in the henlike eye which Vegi-Vegi was to paint into her portrait twenty years after this turn of the century, was to tickle a risibility oblique and inverted within the Charlottenburg. She not only was to purchase the triptych for a song, even after Vegi-Vegi's prices were soaring, but against the protests of both Kitty and Sierra, was to hang it in their drawing room at Twenty-one East, beneath a small gem of a Rembrandt etching which Kitty had bought for another song at the auction of a famous Long Island estate.

All this, however, was to occur twenty years after the first one

of the new century had tilted its bells over the scene in the drawing room of the house of John Baldwin in the brownstone elegance of New York's Murray Hill residential section.

On the New Year's day of the turn of the century, a blustery one with a wind that ran up under her yellow mink dolman cape, Sierra Baldwin, her hands rather primly within her small barrel of yellow mink muff, and her hair drawn austere beneath her yellow mink turban, hurried up the stoop of a large brown dwelling in East Seventeenth Street that had obviously undergone tortuous architecture and façade changes in its transition from an erstwhile handsome family dwelling to an apartment house.

East Seventeenth Street at the close of the century was decorous and brown-fronted, the spang of horses' hoofs its most characteristic sound. It was a residential street that was destined, sooner than it realized, to undergo violent neighborhood changes. Rows of conservative families, about to be forced to migrate by the deterioration going on toward Third Avenue, still lived conservatively behind heavy lace curtains, dined in heavy walnut basement dining rooms and had not yet relegated family albums and china spittoons to their limbo.

The middle floor in one of the first to be renovated of these rows of somber mausoleums was occupied, so stated the name plate above the doorbell, by Miss Ames and Miss Mullane.

Years after they had moved from this old structure to the house in the East Fifties, the Charlottenburg was to insist that the pleasantest habitat she had ever enjoyed in New York, the Fourth Avenue residence of her parents not excepted, was this musty old railroad apartment of deeply spacious, badly lighted and ventilated rooms.

Owing to the dingy lack of light, Kitty, who could not keep her slim fingers off renovating paint, had coaxed permission from the renting agent to draw wavy silver bands along the footboards of the hallways and staircases. The result was the fantastic effect of a grin, throughout the dim corridors, which Miss Mullane contended not only saved gas, but by distracting, and, oh, yes, if you insist, probably offending the eye, saved the weary climber full realization of how steep and narrow the stairs.

To Sierra, any approach whatsoever to the apartment of this pair would have amounted to ladder to a heaven, because nowhere

in her experience, at her various schools and certainly not since her year in a girls' seminary in Switzerland, had she experienced the kind of compatibility she now enjoyed in the combined personalities of Charlotte Praag Ames and Katherine Mullane.

Of beginnings less adventurously picturesque than that of the Mullanes of Kerry Patch, St. Louis, the Praag family, of pedigreed Dutch origin that stemmed back to Manhattan's early settlers, had once been financially and socially representative in New York, a background from which the Charlottenburg could sometimes seem to want to shake herself free, in proportion to the degree Kitty tried to accent it.

It was the manner in which Charlotte Praag Ames, overweight, forthright and foursquare, had fallen out of stride with the goose-step of her class, which had first caused her to charge into Sierra's experience.

It was literally upon a charging mare that the Charlottenburg had first ridden into Sierra's life.

The first time the nun-faced daughter of the copper magnate ever laid eyes on Charlotte Ames was when Sierra was sixteen and home from boarding school for Easter holidays. Standing on a curbstone at Fifth Avenue and Twenty-eighth Street, unimbued with crusader's spirit, she had waited, rather impatiently, for a lull in a suffrage parade to enable her to cross.

The Charlottenburg, twenty-five then, herself also not too imbued with the suffrage spirit, but corraled into action by zealots, had ridden past on a white horse in the front ranks of the procession.

She had looked down at the clear-faced girl on the curb, winked solemnly and pranced on, her mount causing the side lines to buzz as she passed.

In a sense, that figure of the Charlottenburg astride her horse had not ridden past at all. It had remained stock-still, winking from her horse, a photograph against the retina of Sierra's eye. A few years later they were to meet at a settlement house Children's Day, where a friendship, really begun that day of the suffrage parade, was to come to life.

The advent of Sierra was to transform into a trio that strangest of compatibilities which had already existed for years between the Charlottenburg and a piece of thistledown, Katherine Mullane,

who had blown circuitously upon her from the "Kerry Patch" Irish slum section of St. Louis, Missouri.

No, it could be truly said there had never been a moment in the three years since this pair of friendships had given her life its most important dimension, that the silver stripes painted by Kitty along the baseboards of halls and stairways had not been pathway to the heaven of Sierra's existence.

On her brisk walk from the house in Murray Hill, the stimulating prospect of her visit took pleasant shape in Sierra's mind. Later that same day she would have to face adjustments between her father and Florence; Florence and Burl; Leonore Boardman and her father. Her own personal adjustments, chiefly because they meant deferring to her sister, had somehow become surprisingly simple with light of this New Year's Day.

"Your shirtwaist is really a hair shirt," Kitty had told her one day. "Martyrdom fits you like a glove."

"Perhaps."

So now, in the confusion of her pain, it actually seemed happy dispensation that her sister Florence, more of a stranger to her in a hundred ways than the workers with whom she rubbed shoulders at the settlement house, had found this happiness at the expense of her own. In a strange inverted manner, she preferred it that way.

If it had to be, she chose that Florence's life, rather than hers, shape itself in the design of the happiness she would find with Burl. Kitty was right. She was that way. Not through any virtue, any more than in the color of her eyes or the shape of her hands, resided virtue. Her job lay clearly ahead. Florence must be rid of her delusion of self-abnegation to a year's waiting for her marriage with Burl. Burl's opportunity in New Zealand might not wait. Time might not wait. Florence must capture her happiness while it lay within easy reach.

The same for her father and Leonore. And last, the selfish insistence of her own desires. The house at Twenty-one East, so coveted by Kitty for what she was pleased to call the Retreat of the Virgins, could be bought for Kitty's proverbial "song," in a neighborhood which Kitty envisioned would triple its value in five years. Even with his immense diminution of holdings, her father could still buy that house for the three of them without



the quiver of a pocket nerve. Not that she would ever ask it. But in the face of these new events, she could now, out of her own bank reserve, enter with Kitty and the Charlottenburg on the joint enterprise of the purchase of this house. The necessary down payment for the fifty-thousand-dollar property was less than five, or at least Kitty had said it could be so maneuvered. She could easily manage more than half of that.

She had been through the natty, thoroughly modern dwelling at Twenty-one East, with its charming rear garden, and the three floors lending themselves so adequately to the needs of the trio. Even the extreme narrowness of the property, twenty-two feet, lent it tucked-away charm.

In this prospect of a co-operative home with these excitingly assorted friends lay stimulating alternative, at least, to the richer achievement of life with Burl, and faraway frontiers to conquer in New Zealand.

The Charlottenburg, she envisioned as she walked, had probably been up hours, and would be seated by now, perhaps, at second breakfast, while Kitty had her first. Kitty, scarcely awake, and not quite oriented to an animate world, would crunch toast between her small sharp teeth and say small sharp things. Her hands, as she ate, would be gloved and her head probably wrapped in a colored scarf. Her hair, which she had lost during a hard and precarious attack of typhoid, now grew tough, short and shaggy on her head, presaging by more than a decade the short-haired fashion for women which lay beyond.

Sure enough, the first morning of the new century revealed the two of them, true to holiday form, as they dawdled over a small portable breakfast table, drawn up before the going fireplace.

It was characteristic, even in the days when these two were living on incomes derived from Kitty's experimental position as shopper's adviser (a role invented by her) in the Art and Lamp Department of Wanamaker's Store and from the Charlottenburg's secretarial position with a city alderman, that Kitty should see to it that their meals, prepared by a part-time maid, were models of precision and perfection.

Eventually, after the move to Twenty-one East, the cuisine of this menage of three women was to achieve no little local celebrity.

It was to become town topic that you dined well and exotically at Twenty-one East. There, you were apt to eat your first eel *meunière*, stir your first crystals of colored sugar into your demitasse, encounter wines and liqueurs of vintage and locale not familiar. Here, too, you were to meet "the strangest people"; frequently, the "right people"; more than usually, interesting people, and always and dependably, the people dug up from heavens knows where!

On the morning of the first day of the new century, in the old flat in the transformed dwelling on East Seventeenth Street, reputed to have once been occupied by James Fenimore Cooper, Kitty, already going in for the mild eccentricities, was breakfasting in long mauve suede gloves which harmonized with the twist of blue ribbon on her pink negligee and in her hair.

The Charlottenburg, who breakfasted in a white shirtwaist and black bicycle skirt, called them "damned fussy nonsense paws," but could not seem to keep her fascinated eyes from following their delicate peregrinations in and out among eggcups, toast rack and coffee urn.

When Sierra entered, bringing more cold than Kitty could face without a shudder, the small mauve nonsense paws were tilting the last drainings of the silver coffee urn into the Charlottenburg's extended cup. A bright electric-blue and emerald-green fire leaped in the grate, the extraordinary effects accomplished by a process (patent pending) invented by a pair of young fellows whom the Charlottenburg had discovered working in the livery stable where she occasionally rented conveyances. Before the drawn window curtains, glittered Kitty's really beautiful Christmas tree, hung with hundreds of colored popcorn balls (the first the town had seen).

How good it was to walk into this tonic world. Where, in all the universe she knew anything about, was the equivalent of the Charlottenburg greeting her in that booming voice of hers; Kitty, a blue Maltese, purring in the shadow of this lion.

"Happy Twentieth Century, Sierra! Here is a nibble of toast and some tangerine marmalade and five drops of mocha, if the Charlottenburg has left that much. Oh, my High Sierra, what have we on this morning! Promise never, never again to wear those hideous neck-shortening stiff collars with your shirtwaist.

You look like one of those voting females Mark Twain must be talking about in this morning's *Times*. Here, let me at least retie that gruesome-looking four-in-hand. What would you, Sierra mia, and you, my Charlottenburg, do without Kit in her mits!"

"Sit down, Sierra, if Kitty's din doesn't rob you of the power, and tell us how you spent New Year's Eve in the nefarious bosom of your family," boomed the Charlottenburg, pulling the contents of her coffee cup at one long gulp and lighting her already notorious small black cigar.

"More profitably, I suppose, than I've ever spent any New Year's Eve, or for that matter any eve of any sort, in my life."

"You interest us strangely. In fact, for the moment I can think of no subject more vitally absorbing to both of us than profit. We, who are about to go into the red, would know more, High Sierra, of profit."

"Oh, Kitty, for God's sake stop purring like a leopard and let someone else talk."

"The Charlottenburg is dyspeptic, Sierra. She swallowed a young man last night. Her cannibalism was magnificent, except that he happened to be the wrong young man. As a matter of fact, he happened to be my young man. My shadow boxer from Helsingfors. Poor fellow, a stranger in a strange land, I asked him in for a quiet New Year's Eve with two old maids who had decided to spend it quietly at home, and what happens! The Charlottenburg sees possibilities in him and God help any young man in whom she sees possibilities. We drank to the new century and possibilities."

"For a person of your alleged Mullane astuteness, you certainly have talent for overlooking a windfall when it happens on your own doorstep. Your Finn is a novelty act for the parlor circuit if there ever was one. I can book that young man for a dozen country house engagements before tomorrow night. He's beautiful, dumb, and can box in a drawing room without knocking over the Sèvres lamps. The women will fall for him and bored males will have entertainment to their liking. You bet your life I ate that young man, not from appetite for him, either."

"The woman is smart, Sierra. We may yet make a first down payment on Twenty-one East."

"Pass those ridiculous sugar crystals, Kitty," said the Char-

lottenburg with irrelevance. "If you must foist them upon a disinterested world, at least don't have them come in lavenders and pink. The sight of pink sugar coats my tongue."

"But they have possibilities! Elsie Pretorius has already asked where we get them, whereupon I humbly confessed myself agent, guaranteeing immediate delivery."

"Sit here beside me, Sierra, I'm too fat to share that silly love seat with you. Now, explain the most profitable evening of your life. Too bad you didn't spend it with us."

"Have you come to tell us that your papa is presenting you with a horseless carriage! Oh, to own a beauty like the dream of a Winton Six that Maude Adams drives."

"We are now off again on Kitty's psychopathic-ward subject of the horseless carriage. What's your profitable news, Sierra?"

"My sister Florence is going to marry Henry George Burleigh."

"I shouldn't think that would be particularly profitable news," remarked the Charlottenburg dryly. "I've always fancied you fancied that dehydrated and highly solemn mummy, since the night I met him at your home at dinner."

"Good God, Charlottenburg," cried Kitty, "how you rave. What would Sierra see in that owlish young man with a passion for wiping little noses? What a perfect mate Florence will not make him."

"They are going to live in New Zealand."

"That will be a help. I can fancy you aunt to a large crop of little New Zealanders."

"There is little we can do, Sierra, except sit tight, and be prayerful until Kit's fancied strain of wit and humor has run its course."

"Also, my father is going to marry Leonore Boardman."

After a long silent second, the Charlottenburg put down her cup with a bang, a change of color from ruddy to tan sweeping her face. "Good God," she said, and a silence that she had interrupted, resumed.

"I think," said Kitty finally, tossing her lavender-clad paws in a mock gesture, "that my wee self is going to faint," and slumped softly in her chair.

"Many a true word," remarked the Charlottenburg, popping caraway seeds rapidly into her mouth. "Your father, Sierra, is

even a bigger fool than I thought. But on with your discourse, while Kitty pulls herself together."

"Sierra, my babe in the wood, did it ever occur to you that I would have married your father like a shot?"

"Kitty, what nonsense!"

"Why nonsense?"

"For one thing, my papa is old enough to be your father."

"Suppose?"

"Kitty, you're being ridiculous!"

"Of course I am. But I'm either going to feather my matrimonial bed now, or spend the rest of my life trying to live by my wits, an amusing enough method while young, but precarious as the arteries begin to ossify."

"But my father ——"

"I would have made you an admirable stepmother."

"I prefer you this way, Kitty."

"Apparently Sierra's father does too."

"Charlottenburg, mocker of my pain! It's not fair. This is Leonore's third. Tell your father to beware, Sierra. She's never divorced one. They all die natural or conceivably unnatural deaths in bed, adoring her and leaving badly depleted estates, instead of the fortunes she visualized when she married them. Take the entire procession, Horace Brampton, John Plow, Robbie Boardman. Well, anyway, now as I emerge feebly from my state of faint, may I inquire what of Oliver Plow, whom I've never met, but who they do say has a way with us ladies."

"Really, Kitty, you seem to know so much more about all this than I do. From what little I've seen, I think Leonore Boardman is lovely."

"She's the best thing, next to the feline here, of course, that could have happened to a rough and subdued diamond like your papa," snapped the Charlottenburg. "She has sweetness, she has gratitude, and her going has frequently been so lean that I've seen her gushingly grateful for an invitation to dinner."

"She's eaten more free meals than any woman-and-stepson in town, hasn't she, Charlottenburg?"

"I can't speak for the stepson whom I've never even seen. Leonore is quite a getter, which, my dear Kitty, should make her highly compatible with you. As for all this talk of her and her

stepson, it may be that where there's smoke, there's fire. On the other hand, where there is smoke, there is frequently only a lot of gossip mongers playing with fire."

"Tell me more, Charlottenburg, of this future stepmother of mine."

"She has breeding. The Cowens are three generations New York and first-rate Scotch-Irish background. She's the last of a line. Incurably sentimental, will go as far as she dares, which isn't usually very far and can be counted on, I think, to be discreet in her indiscretions, unless this Oliver Plow business is in her marrow instead of her tear ducts."

"But my father ——"

"Nonsense. He's darn lucky. Leonore's greedy as a puppy but good-natured. She's lived in shabby gentility too long not to see to it that this marriage is a success."

"If it isn't, there's always poor Kitty," observed Miss Mullane in her best plaintive manner.

"Never mind, I know the sweet-and-lowness of the entire Cowen outfit. They were all of Leonore's stripe. She'll upholster your papa's life so agreeably, in return for his excellent board and keep and Oliver's, that his poor old tired behind won't encounter a single spring in his armchair."

"Except, possibly, Oliver Plow."

"After all, your father's woman-picture, even with a High Sierra in the family, has been pretty damned terrible."

"It has. It has. That's why my sister Florence's scruples seem so unbearably silly! She's afraid of this Oliver Plow."

"With that flabby brain who claims to be your sister out of the picture and Leonore in it, your old man, with what's left of his money, his health and his span of life, has a right to consider that his future lies ahead of him. Let Leonore have her Plow in the end, if she wants the nincompoop. But meanwhile, if your father only has a few years of happiness with her, he wins if he loses."

"But," wailed Kitty, dipping bits of toast into her coffee, then into the honey pot, and feeding them to an oversize tortoise-shell cat on her chair, "Kitty did so want to marry your papa, Sierra. Kit's so tired. So—o—o tired."

"Aforementioned Kitty, I should say, is in the act of also making me very tired, not to say sick to my stomach."

"Would it be amiss," smiled Sierra, "if I were to suggest that you two cease bickering and realize the fact that the Baldwin family's eccentric spinster, what with Florence's and father's marriages, is now free to set herself up in quarters with that arresting and irresistible mistress of all trades, Miss Katherine Mullane, and her colleague Miss Charlotte Ames, who rivals classification."

"Are you in the act of advising us that after having led the faltering feet of your two sinister friends in the direction of certain copper investments that permit them to live in a state bordering on sin, you are now about to pool your resources with them and achieve Twenty-one East?"

"It's only fair, especially now that Father has made Florence and me independent, that I should give right-of-way to Leonore."

"Be honest with yourself, Sierra. You've been wanting out of that brownstone mausoleum since ——"

"Since I met you and Kitty."

"Sierra, I can't bear it. Next to having won for my *virgo intacto* own the hand of your parent, Twenty-one East would represent the high point of this misspent life. Be rich enough to afford it, Sierra, now that the brown mausoleum you call home is about to slide from under you. We'll carry the mortgage between us if you'll just plank down the initial cash payment. Won't we, Charlottenburg?"

"If only Father would buy it for us! He gets so quickly set about things, and I doubt if he'll budge. Don't forget, Florence and I don't actually come into a penny of capital for five years. Father gave Florence and Burl to understand last night that their marriage won't alter his plan for the distribution of our inheritance. They'll have to exist on their own in the beginning. Father is big in big things, and little in little ones."

"Tell him that your friend, whose youth and beauty he passed up for the ashes-of-roses brand of Leonore Boardman, who, I insist, is in love with her stepson ——"

"I think Sierra heard you the first time, Kitty."

"Sorry. Anyway, tell him, Sierra, that your frustrated friend has been eating her sweet heart away for love of that small gem of a McGuffy house in Twenty-one East. Tell him that your

talented and gifted friend, realizing the novelty value of what is probably the narrowest house in New York City, itches to prove, that by judicious use of mirrors, genius and currency of the United States, said narrowest house can be transformed into the talk of the town."

"You don't know Father, Kitty. He's doing a broad-minded thing in settling our inheritance upon us in this fashion, but now that it's decided, his mind will close like a trap. Besides, I wouldn't want to ask ——"

"Tell him your friend, the one and only, the inimitable Charlottenburg, has sufficient social and professional prestige, combined, of course, with his daughter's high personality, to say nothing of the nimble and not too scrupulous wits of Miss Kitty Mullane, to make number Twenty-one East the narrow salon of the town."

"Shut up, Kitty. That is poppycock, sheer, utter and complete. We'll make our down payment on what capital we can scrape and borrow on Sierra's prospects. Meanwhile, if Sierra's old man gets benign as his wedding day approaches, we'll be duly grateful, if not unduly surprised. As for a salon. Salon my hind foot. What I'm interested in, is office room combined with a place to sleep, eat and have my fleshy being."

"Of course, yes, Charlottenburg, and I have a dream of a plan for it."

"Keep your dream, Missy Mullany. My offices are going to be reality, at Twenty-one East, so a fat old applegate like myself doesn't have to drag her tired behind downtown to a swivel chair in the Flatiron Building."

"Don't be gross, and you shall have your office in Twenty-one East, with a separate ground-floor entrance, your business shingle, 'Charlottenburg, Inc. Bookings,' in neat gold, and an office-living room that will make architectural history. Ideal for work and for play, you will bask by its fireside in your negligee, or transact across its desk top in your shirtwaist."

"You make a hall bedroom sound strangely attractive."

"I admit, I'd trade the whole shebang for a cottage with Virginia creepers, if Sierra's papa hadn't passed me up."

"Kitty, the frustration motif has worn a bit thin. Let's leave Father to Leonore, and concentrate on us."



"Sierra, you're to have the top floor because it matches your altitude. There you shall dwell, chaste in oyster grays, while in between, the nonsense in the sandwich, Kitty will plan her salon floor in rose and golds; Empire, Watteau and froufrou."

"M—m—m, 'Charlottenburg, Inc.' I like the terseness, even if the meaning of my new business shingle is somewhat vague to me at the moment."

"I'll design your stationery letterhead, too, Charlottenburg," pursued the ebullient Kitty. "Bold black on bold white:

Charlottenburg, Inc.  
Entertainment Bureau.

Novelty Acts. Lecturers.

For Drawing Room and Professional Entertainments.

Mine will be violet lettering on mauve. One word which I intend to make into a cannon ball.

#### MULLANE

High Sierra's will be gray on gray. Gray as a moor on a gray day, never having seen a moor on a gray day or on any day at all, there will be originality in that there gray."

"Something tells me," observed Miss Baldwin, "that it is as good as settled that Twenty-one East is to be henceforth the address of three—of three ——"

"Reluctant virgins," interposed the Charlottenburg. "Some more of that marmalade, please!"

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## CHAPTER II

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LESS than half a year after the marriage of John Baldwin to Leonore Boardman, shirred white silk shades, always fully drawn, appeared in every front window of the conspicuously narrow, three-storied, Twenty-one East. A black iron grill, balcony effect, before each of these front windows lent a sense of importance to the pencil-thin brick edifice, with its white stone trim and scarlet front door.

"There are limits to this business of giving Kitty her head," the Charlottenburg had observed the first day the trio took possession. "I'll stand for the blue canaries on my bathroom ceiling if I must, and you seem spineless enough, Sierra, about the gravy boat of a bed in your room, but there is something about a red front door that reminds me of a hussy who comes down to breakfast in old gilt evening slippers and last night's caviar on her chin."

"My little invitation in color, to all ye who enter here to prepare to be gay, seems to have gone a bit wild of its mark. I hope, Sierra, you, being more decently appreciative, have observed the small hall door I have accomplished for you, so that in case of liaison or emergency, you can reach your floor unknown to the nefarious two with whom you share hearth."

"Where is your own secret door?"

"Beneath my bathtub, Charlottenburg. I like for my liaisons to rise from the sea like Aphrodite."

"I don't know what all your nonsense is about," smiled Sierra, "but I do know that however badly I may fit Kitty's version of Twenty-one East, it fits me from its red door, all the way up to my floor with its gravy-boat bed."

That was true. As incongruous to this environment as Kitty's Maxfield Parrish panels inserted above the Charlottenburg mantel-piece were incongruous to that lady, life here was something Sierra wanted.

Not that the background reflected Kitty any more than it did Sierra or the Charlottenburg. Imbedded beneath the speciousness of Kitty's attitude concerning this somewhat erratic production of her imagination, were shrewd and thoughtful reasons. You could bet your bottom dollar, as the Charlottenburg put it, Kit knew what she was doing! As a matter of fact, Twenty-one East, with its painted swans floating across the bottom of one bathtub; its beautiful Empire stairway which Kitty had bought from a wrecking firm and managed to install in the narrowest well of a space in any house in New York; its tiny French drawing room of Récamier couch and bois-de-rose consoles with elaborate ormolu mountings (also bought incredibly cheap at auction) were part of her premature revolt away from the interior fixings of Queen Victoria, Grand Rapids and President McKinley.

"Is this your idea of the salon of what you are pleased to call the three *virgos intactos*? It looks to me more like the clubhouse of three fantastic whores," remarked the Charlottenburg, poking a throne chair in Sierra's room with the tip of the cane she was choosing to affect these days, but which was shortly to become indispensable. The chair, upholstered in a bit of tapestry depicting a passage from the Holy Grail, stood austere beside an elaborate palissander table of *regence* design, which served as a desk. The chair, fitting Sierra as snugly as she fitted it, was somehow a sly caricature of a Flemish-looking lady with a straight spine and straight eyebrows and a straight wide mouth. It was a handsome chair; devilishly right for the right person, and Kitty was a devil!

A whimsy of a devil with mauve paws, and the mischievous talent to do a pair of perfect caricatures in the design and place-

ment of a Gothic chair (Sierra) beside the flippancy of a *regence* table (Kitty).

Yet withal, in its fundamentals, it was a serious house. Solid, expensive plumbing; a garbage incinerator (patent applied for and destined not to achieve its perfection for another twenty years). An early vintage ventilating system of pulleys, chains and transoms (its perfection also two decades ahead); push bells; dumb-waiters; a graphophone with the usual horrific morning-glory horn which Kitty, by removing the top of the ormolu palissander commode, had managed to immerse inside the chest, thus concealing the instrument, and inaugurating generations to come of graphophone containers built to look like something else.

It was a house with an economically and well-thought-out heating system, a large, bright, ground-floor kitchen with a window which faced the street, and equipped with cookery devices that were to play their part in establishing the reputation of Twenty-one East for cuisine worthy of that self-styled gourmet, the Charlottenburg.

"Kitty loves to go haywire in the things that don't matter. It's her idea of personality-at-any-price, even at the price of mauve paws," remarked the Charlottenburg, riding her hand up and down on the excellent mattress to her bed and trying out window shades on their strong taut springs. "But watch her on the essentials. There may be canaries in the bathrooms, and bats in the belfry, but the plumbing is magnificent and don't worry about your gravy-boat bed. Her mattresses are rest cures. The wholesalers where she had them made presented her with them, because she gave them the idea for a new trade name, 'Rest-Cure Mattresses.' Cut through Kitty's whipped cream top, and you strike marble cake."

It was a strong house, boasting substantial mortgage terms negotiated by Kitty and the Charlottenburg, terms which, when John Baldwin heard them, he declared to be as astute a deal as he would have turned himself.

And now, here they were, the three of them, face to face with the reality of their first night of occupancy of Twenty-one East.

"It would be misplaced, I suppose," said Miss Mullane, "to succumb to the varied emotions which I feel coming on for this absurd first moment in our Virgin's Retreat."

"It would," replied the Charlottenburg, "particularly in view of the fact that this side-splitting mansion fits Sierra and me as badly as it fits you like a mauve glove. Miss Mullane being droll with the Empire period; Miss Mullane squatting me on spindle-legged chairs; cradling Sierra in a gravy boat."

"Kitty is quite right, Charlottenburg. I'm going to develop an emotion too, if you don't stave it off."

"The grand creature is moved," cried Kitty. "You *are* moved or something profound like that, now aren't you, Sierra!"

"I am," replied Miss Baldwin, regarding them both with her level eyes bright and stirred. "As a matter of fact, if the fishy gaze of the Charlottenburg were not on me, I could weep. This means a lot to me. So much that I doubt if you two free spirits who have had the courage to take your lives by the horns, realize what it means to mere me, who is about to enter into your unbelievable world. I've waited long for this! I think I'd rather be me, starting out on this adventure in Twenty-one East, with you and the Charlottenburg than—than ——"

"Than the rajah's bride, I suppose," said the Charlottenburg dryly.

"Not me," cried Kitty, tinkering constantly with the arrangement of the new drapes in the Charlottenburg's office-living room. "Over and above all else, I could do with a rajah husband, provided the center diamond in his turban was larger than the Hope diamond."

"Just the sweet, winsome and undesigning Kitty that you appear to be on your silken surface, aren't you, my mauve paws," observed the Charlottenburg, seated at what was always to seem her incongruous process of knitting and pulling the while on her small black cigar, which seemed not quite so incongruous.

A young British playwright, as yet unknown on both continents and who had arrived on American shores with a letter of introduction to the Charlottenburg, had written his first letter home describing her as "knitting like Three cigar-smoking Fates in one."

Above the bright yarns which she liked to feel glide between her fingers, the Charlottenburg's oyster-pale face, already well scalloped with double chin, slanted down toward the work in hand, her fingers babbling along with incessant agility, her eyes

directed toward, but seldom seeing the stitches which she performed as reflexly as she batted her pale and wary lids.

It was as if while she knitted, pausing at intervals to draw on her cigar, that she folded into the pattern of her yarns, the unspoken thoughts that kept her expression so puckish.

"If the Charlottenburg's mufflers and mittens could only speak," remarked the same British playwright after he had achieved a success under her management, "then we would know what she is really thinking about."

"God help you," she remarked to him dryly, "if those wristbands I knitted for you ever begin to chat to one another."

Seated there in Twenty-one East, smoke enveloping her, knees spread, face and eyes slanting down, the robust magnetism of the knitting Charlottenburg was to remain to Sierra an unending source of excitement.

Her wide spread of body, her seeming casualness, her pale eye, sardonic, evaluating, were an adventure in personality.

Gone, as if Sierra had dropped a wrap from her shoulders, were the years of brown-plush living, of a motherless and rudderless girl in a brownstone mausoleum, over which lay the cracked laughter of Mamie Baldwin, who had been hauled from it during the years Sierra was in pinafores.

Here they were, newly established. Three women in a tiny but dazzling nucleus of a house already filled with the personalities of two with whom Sierra intended to match up her own design of existence.

Bachelor girls!

The newly coined phrase of the newly coined century rang like a coin on a counter.

"I wonder, Sierra," remarked Kitty, her mauve eyes watching every move of the new, staff-of-one, servant she had installed, "if that parent of yours, who is now sharing board and bed with Leonore, when he might have known the delights of Kitty——"

"I am afraid, dear, that discussion is about milked dry of its alleged comic implications."

"What Mullane, who is utterly lacking in my well-known forthrightness, is about to remark, Sierra, is that she has spent three times as much as our budget permits, in rigging us up here like three harridans out of hell, and it is now once more up to your

papa's financial hind and foresight to direct our investments, if we are to live up to the style to which we are not accustomed."

"In other words ——"

"No, in the same crude words, our respective, if not too respectable incomes, derived from combined soldier-of-fortune, messing in thisa and thata, add up to deficit.

"If only I had been clever enough to become your stepmother, Sierra. Then there wouldn't be the ridiculous and periodic necessity of approaching the oracle of your father for an investment tip that will enable the two aged harridans with whom you have chosen to consort, to live less visibly beyond their means."

"Father has an old-fashioned dislike for handling women's investments. It's only because of the enchantment the Charlottenburg seems to cast over him that he was prevailed upon to gamble for you last time. He hates it!"

"A tip from your father isn't a gamble. It's an investment."

"Besides, we're good losers."

"Be honest with yourself, Kit. You know well and good that we know that John Baldwin isn't going to let us lose—that's why he hates to do business with women."

"I'm not well-born, like you, Charlottenburg. I come from a shanty family where honesty with one's self or others isn't recklessly practiced."

"The Charlottenburg is right. Father isn't going to let us down. Not that he will feel it, but I want terribly to be on my own, particularly now that Leonore has her rights, and Florence and I—have been provided for. At least we will be, once we begin to come into our money. Perhaps out of my present allowance I could eke ——"

"No, nothing like that. We three are jointly incorporated into this enterprise of living together. If you want to add your share to the seven thousand Kitty and I can manage between us, that is another matter."

"I do. I've about seven thousand I could lay hands on, counting poor Mother's tiny legacy, and my share in a bank stock I own jointly with Florence."

"Good. Your father may quadruple our total, or do anything he sees fit. Copper can do wonderful things."

"It hasn't for Father in recent years."

"Perhaps his greatest future does lie behind him. But his record for turning copper to gold should still hold when it comes to turning thirteen or fourteen thousand into sufficient gold to make his daughter's living mates fit companions for her."

"Remember, Sierra *mia*, he once did turn our two thousand into twenty."

"Most of which Kitty and I have proceeded to sink in Twenty-one East, in jewelry making, in indigent British playwrights, in crackpot inventors, dance teams, colored fire, colored sugar ——"

"You are a pair of naughty and amazing women. I adore you. I adore you as much as I detest going to my father and asking him to ——"

"Subsidize our lunacy ——"

"—and asking him to give us a tip that will enable three deserving spinsters to make Twenty-one East, what it already is to me, the most exciting house in the world."



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## CHAPTER III

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### C HARLOTTENBURG, INC. BOOKINGS.

The small gilt plate outside the Charlottenburg's office-living room, which Kitty had designed as lovingly as if it had been one of the finely wrought pieces of handmade jewelry which she sold to department stores, bore the Ames coat of arms. Above the lettering, a pair of whippets with mercury wings on their flanks held a shield sewn with seven stars.

There had been controversy over this.

"Crest on my shingle! Great cream-colored Christopher! There has been Ames incest, skulduggery, wife beating and horse thieving all the way back to the Norman invasion, to say nothing of a notorious slave trader hanging somewhere by his neck on my family tree. As for the knaves and ne'er-do-wells, you need only to look at me for a good composite portrait of my lineage."

"What about Abigail and Theresa Ames, and the one, I forget his name, who fought in the American Revolution, and unless I am mistaken, paid not only his own bills, but by way of a handsome loan to the government, paid many of the bills of his country? Were they all members of the wife-beaters' union and the Institute for Female Derelicts?"

"No, but my distinguished and useful forebears speak for themselves. The others reek for themselves."

"I suppose, living the first years of my life as I did, in a shanty section of St. Louis, and seeing the male members of my community belching drunk on Sundays and most of the evenings in between, would generate within the fastidious spirit of a girl-child born into this stinking hell, something akin to snobbish reverence for the well-bred and the nice-smelling."

"Be that as it may, you don't wear a coat of arms on your office name plate, any more than you wear your panties outside."

"What you want is something in white porcelain, as we design them for ladies' rooms, trade entrances and chiropodists."

"Trade, pray God I'll have some, suits me."

"Yes, but remember. Sierra and I may supply the youth and beauty to Twenty-one East, but we look to you for lineage. The heraldic design of the Baldwins is probably a pickax. Mine is what is known in Kerry Patch as a 'growler,' or a pail designed to contain fermenting hops, and God, how my old man could rush the growler!"

"My dear Mullane, I find I like you a great deal more than I admire you."

"More fortunate for me, my dear Charlottenburg, than if it were the other way around."

"And while we're on the subject, Kitty, that portrait of my grandmother Ames, which you have had so prettily restored, is a bit trying on my bedroom wall. She was a hellion on wheels and led my poor grandfather a hell of a life. The mere sight of her makes me feel hag-ridden, too. Replace her portrait with a water color of hell."

Thus it was not more than a matter of weeks in the new residence before Kitty's delicately wrought scene of Directoire mirrors, Louis XVI consoles, wire-grilled cabinets of Egyptian Empire form, Venetian baroque, Tuscan walnut, Florentine furnishings, subtly and rightly interspersed with English *Regence*, marquetry, metal appliqué and colored marbles, suffered the sacrilege of the Charlottenburg, as the house began to take on her imprint.

Before the invasion of a kidney-shaped desk which had come down to the Ames family from the Benjamin Harrison era of interiors, and small horrendous items such as a carpet-covered hassock,

pillow-back Hitchcock chair, mahogany tip-top table, the Empire mood of Kitty's conception began to totter.

"Must you," wailed Miss Mullane, "ruin the window embrasure with that hideosity of a desk after I did everything but use brass knuckles to outbid bidders at the Askoth auction in order to get that dream of a *Regence* desk knocked down to me!"

"—the damned Regency thing doesn't fit my stomach."

"That's because you're letting yourself get such an enormous one."

"I intend to be fat."

"In order, no doubt, to prove that your irresistible fascination can rise above my congenital abhorrence of fat."

"Not at all. I am preparing my state of mind for the inevitable. A slender girlhood got me nowhere. In all my variegated years, two men and two men only, have asked me to marry them, both nincompoops and nitwits, who ultimately married two of my girlhood friends instead, also a pair of nincompoops with no faces and no minds. Their children are now old enough to intermarry and the whole shebang form imitation pillars of society. The one man I would have married, up and married his mistress instead. There's my love life in a nutshell, or as much of it as I care to reveal to your extremely pretty and greedy ears."

"All of which, my pet, has little to do with your increasing overweight."

"On the contrary, I am using our entry into Twenty-one East as a milestone. From here on I let go and guzzle my way into gustatory paradise and a stomach large enough to fit into the curve of my grandfather Ames' kidney-shaped desk."

"I suppose I shall adore you even fatter than you are."

"I advise you to prepare for girth and more girth. Having missed the supreme carnal satisfactions, I intend to fatten on the lesser ones. I once dined at a house in London where Bernard Shaw was present. As he nibbled his beets and carrots, I had the feeling that if you took him between your hands and blew on him, he would make a shrill screeching sound as if he were a blade of grass. I intend to be fat, Kit, softly, fragrantly, immensely and fatly fat; full of my own rich juices, stoked by them into a roaring furnace, so that——"

"—Twenty-one East shall become a culinary oasis in a land

guilty of founding the vile institutions of hot bread, baked beans and fruit salads smeared in mayonnaise."

The Charlottenburg waved her cane. "I would rather have instituted my country's ham and eggs than written its songs! But out of here! A youth by the irresistible name of Dennis O'Flaherty is due. He claims to be a nephew of Parnell and has a slender sheaf of what is sure to be slender verse, which he is to read to me across the top of my stomach-fronted desk."

"The tender meat of a young man out of Dublin is a pretty dish to set before the Duchess," said Miss Mullane, trailing her blonde negligee with an elaborateness entirely lost upon the Charlottenburg, who, rigidly shirtwaisted, was poking about in a top drawer of the controversial desk. "I'm having that bloated young scion of a first family, Tommy Scott, for dinner tonight. Who may you be producing for the festal board? Does O'Flaherty stay on?"

"I turn the pages of *Who's Who* for my choice of dinner guests. Those of the *Social Register* make my fingers feel mucky. Niemann is coming."

"Must you, darling? He drools."

"At least not mentally."

"You would ask him the night we're having *sol volante* and I hate it on shirt fronts. I suppose Sierra will top it all by bringing a social uplift note into the occasion by way of a low-heeled high-browed settlement worker."

"There is something to be said for social uplift over and above social climbing."

"Both, my Charlottenburg, are toward the up and up."

"All that stands between me and what sounds like a zero dinner hour is a bit of knitting, if I can find my goddam bag."

"Is that what you are looking for? God, how I hate anyone in the attitude of searching for something. Let me find it for you. Here! It's a wonder this foul anemic blue wool didn't reach out and make you seasick."

"It's to be a muffler for C. K. L. with whom I one day intend to produce a revue."

"Until dinner, kiss Kitty au revoir."

Beneath lids which drooped like crinkly silk window shades, the lips of the Charlottenburg pursed slightly.

"You smell like an expensive hussy."

"I am one at heart. The hussiness of me is what won my admittance into the immense portals of what threatens to be the immense Charlottenburg. There's hussy in those bones of yours too, and plenty of it."

"Scat, you bore me to crocodile tears."

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## CHAPTER IV

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WHAT the Charlottenburg had actually been fumbling for in the recesses of the drawer which contained her knitting was a small stack of unopened letters which had arrived by the day's last post.

After Kitty's departure, she drew them out and remained seated before the desk, dallying them between her fingers. Three of them were identifiable by their envelopes. One was from a theatrical producer. The second bore the name of a life insurance company. The third was in flowing longhand familiar to her.

She spread them like the cards of a game of solitaire, flipping each one as she placed it on the desk. A man-size silver watch, propped against a bronze inkstand, ticked away a baker's dozen of contemplative minutes while she gazed at the closed envelopes as if to draw off their contents as the sun draws moisture.

Presently, the letters still unopened, she began to knit softly in the dusk, the needles forked darts of brightness, their noises soft and sedative. They created little areas of inner quiet within her, these needles, clearing the paths of her mind of small circumstances.

It was a silence upon which she had learned to depend and into which she retired as deliberately as she walked into her bedroom and closed the door after her. It was a habit of mental behavior

that had a revivifying effect upon her; her equivalent of Kitty's nap before dinner; a pick-up after a workaday. In the midst of this silence she sat as broadly as she inhabited her external world, squatting across it, wide spread.

There were many reasons why each of the three letters before her had the potential power to destabilize the stillness which she invoked with her knitting needles. And so, quiescent there in the half-light, physically comfortable in the abundance of warm thick flesh covering her small bones, her eyes and her mind half open, like a frog on a water lily pad, she continued to postpone the moment of their opening.

Kitty, whose perceptions were quick as asps, called this withdrawal which could take place in the eyes and manner of the Charlottenburg, "her going away look."

The needles clacked, the small fire made little hisses, the heavy rep curtains, drawn before windows left slightly open for the clean November air, bulged slowly as the crinkled lids remained lowered over the knitting.

It was pleasant to be secure and indoors in a November twilight that was full of high wind. Let the high winds blow; the high winds of a day that had yielded not one single inch in the myriad projects which were cloaked under the terse door plate which read: Charlottenburg, Inc. Bookings.

First, the case of Hermann Schlossberg, of Vienna, who had been sent to her by a Baroness von Wolfgang, whose American lecture tour she had once managed, had come to its unsuccessful conclusion that day. The immense chemical concern which she had succeeded in interesting in Schlossberg's new dye process had finally decided, after months of consideration, not to negotiate for it. Schlossberg, living in a hotel of good address, on moneys advanced by Charlottenburg, had yet to be handed this staggering blow.

Also, a cable lay tucked beneath the blotter on her desk, announcing that a band of Lilliputians, a current novelty success in Berlin, which she was maneuvering to bring to America, was restrained from leaving Germany by injunction and impending lawsuits.

Well, let the winds blow. It was warm and secure here, temporarily, at least, in this fine new house she shared with Kitty

and Sierra. It was warm and secure here in these naves of inner stillness, while the long steel knitting needles clicked.

This strange new house of herself, Kitty and Sierra! What structure this? How, out of her nicely ordered social background, had she slipped into this world outside the way of most feminine flesh!

The needles drooped, paused, rose again, clicked. I must go on now, fat and ugly, being a virgin until I die. I wonder if Kit or Sierra suspects I am that. I wonder if Kitty, who talks so terribly much, but tells so terribly little of herself, is only half of herself, as I am. Sometimes I think she is. Or has she slept about? There's dryness in that Kitty-cat. Too much dryness. Virgin dryness. Borderline women, that's what we are. Sierra too. I like it this way, yet I want the other too. A male in a bed with me at night, and brats, and the rights that the law grants a wife. Security. Freedom from money worries. I want that and yet I want to be living here in this ridiculous abortion of a home. Living on my wits. On tips from old Baldwin. I could break Kitty's goddam little scheming neck, and yet I couldn't, because—because Kitty is my life—my little dear.

The needles slid down onto her fat lap and lay there. The clock ticked, the curtains bellied inward, the noises of the street spoke up sharply.

Finally the Charlottenburg leaned over and ripped open her three waiting letters. The first declined a play. The second pronounced that an arthritic condition disqualified her for life insurance. The third, in the flowing hand, was from a nephew in San Francisco, and asked for money.



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## CHAPTER V

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KITTY'S hour before dinner was filled with small but sacred rites. Rites that each year mounted in number and inviolability.

In America, that slow inching forward of the dinner hour was taking place scarcely at all. Except for quick-to-capitulate New York, diplomatic Washington and a swatch of Boston known as Back Bay, the nation still drew its knees under a six-thirty dinner table.

In the beginning, the Charlottenburg had rebelled at the installation of the quarter-before-eight dinner hour in Twenty-one East.

"I'm as empty as a bell without a clapper by then. My stomach growls are anything but sweet and low."

"Dinner before eight is supper. History is made at night."

"And the beds in which history is made, the morning after."

"Lewd."

Up in Kitty's room the hour before dinner was pink as a rose. She would have told you not quite that, because she had deliberately shaded it away from those more obvious rose tones, to a sort of sunburned flush. This she had painstakingly and experimentally achieved by lining pink lampshades, sofa pillows, bed covering and window hangings in a beige china silk. The Aubusson rug (picked up for a "song" at an unadvertised auction) had a beige background; so had the pink walls.

This Kitty had literally accomplished by hand, using a flat camel's hair brush the room around, until the desired glow seemed to emanate from the walls.

At every turn, Kitty's rooms attested to her capacity for infinitely minute pains. The seventeenth-century mirror of American design, a direct copy, under her supervision, of one in the Metropolitan Museum, had been reproduced down to the last rubbed spot on the frame. Every inch of the *coquillage* motif on her eighteenth-century French chairs and the Chippendale seat rails had been furbished and refurbished by her small precise fingers. Every foot of the wainscoting, as the polish was ground into the wood of a house already ten years old, had been personally supervised by her, standing hours on end amid the workmen. Even the gilding of the tiny egg-and-dart design of the rosette which held the crystal chandelier (picked up at the famous Ramsdale auction for Kitty's usual song) had been directed by her, standing with her head tilted backward until the room swam.

"Infinite capacity for pains over things that don't matter a lot," reiterated the Charlottenburg, when the gilt darts on the ceiling rosette had been pridefully pointed out to her.

"Everything or nothing matters. It matters to me that I am the sort of perfectionist who bothers about gilt tips to the dart-and-egg design, chiefly because it makes me the kind of person adored by you."

"In spite of, rather than because of."

"Fair enough. Adore me for what I am not."

The hour inviolate into which Kitty sank after leaving the Charlottenburg facing her letters, was precisely what she planned it must be; a resuscitating interlude of warm bath that soaked the tiredness from her bones; of deeply cushioned quiet on the flat of her back, with her eyes closed and her small, too-eager fists self-consciously relaxed.

The tenseness of a body braced for competition crept out of her as the warm water of the bath flowed over the run-down temperature of her body, causing a little flush to hurry along her limbs and beneath the flat white cheeks.

During this edge-of-the-day hour of her resuscitation, Kitty, at thirty, became radiant with the elfin quality of the ragtag Kitty Mullane of Kerry Patch, St. Louis. Her small damp face,

with the damp hair pinned in a cluster of curls away from the water, became that of a sprite.

I should have a lover come to me from six to seven. History may be made at night, but mine should be made in this darling hour between the decline and fall of my day and the rise of my evening star—whatever that may be——

The shrewd little body, stretched on her bed with wet cotton pads resting her eyelids, had a lifetime habit of talking aloud to herself. Beneath the cotton pads, her soft lips moved.

I should have a lover to come to me between six and seven—I should have—a lover—I should have—a—lover.

Even as an errand girl in an interior decorator's shop, she had managed to allow herself this hour at the conclusion of her day's rushing about from one wholesale house to another matching colors and obtaining swatches.

She had shared a slit of a room then, in an endowed home for working girls, and had barricaded herself from possible interference from her roommate by throwing herself on her cot and pulling the covers up over her head. Her habit of talking to herself from beneath them had signalized, rather than stigmatized her as a roommate. Just as she had been accented back in the Kerry Patch days as Pat Mullane's baby cyclone, her bright face that of a little fever patient, so she had stood out in the Clara Booth Home for Working Girls, as one of those with her shoulders above the crowd. They had been squirmy and bony little shoulders and still were. Pushers.

Relaxed, the pushers lay back against the pillow, still a little too thin, but warm and massaged-looking above the line of her nightdress. This was another feature of Kitty's imposed relaxation. The hour before dinner, Kitty, off with her last stitch, went literally to bed.

It was her hour.

There was a young Count de Franac she liked to recall to this dreamy edge of her day. They had met in France, three summers previous, where she had enjoyed, thanks to the connection of Sierra, a de luxe period abroad, chaperoning Maxine Guy, little daughter of a junior member of the firm of Baldwin and Company.

De Franac had been five years younger, infatuated up to the time it had been borne in upon the scion of a depleted old

Norman-French family that Kitty Mullane was not the legendary American heiress, but the paid companion to one. His subsequent precipitate withdrawal had been a thing of precision and subtlety.

Often, at this hour, the vision of the narrow young count, with his wolfhound head, sideburns, graceful flanks, appeared hatted and spatted, his tall hat and walking stick, his boutonniere and gloves, outlined in colored detail against her memory.

He had taken her to tea with his incredibly aged mother in the beautiful but rotting old château some forty miles out of Paris, which his family was about to lose. Even as his surreptitious embraces had warmed her in the chilled ancestral pile, he had relentlessly pressed her for an admission of what he was beginning to suspect: her lack of the vast personal fortune which he considered the birthright of every American girl.

Subsequently, he had fallen back into the limbo of passing young men, but of all that not inconsiderable group, his somewhat Lotharian image had survived, to wander, a light slim vision, into the nostalgia of her twilights.

A few months later, de Franac had married an English girl of no lineage and vast fortune. (Ceylon Tea, as Kitty recalled it.) According to the illustrated weeklies, she had been a chunky girl with healthy cheeks. The superb old rotting château had since, thanks to Ceylon Tea, been restored, with Franac, now an attaché in the French Embassy in London, dividing his time between it and a home in Portland Square, presented by her parents to his wife as her wedding gift.

He must be in his late twenties by now, pale sideburns more in keeping with his maturity than they had been with his youth. The strange magnetic flow from his finger tips was a sensation she could still conjure. She would have slept with de Franac that night had he made overture. . . . For years of twilights, she had given those tingling memories full rein, lying relaxed and receptive to them. She would have slept with him. . . .

There had been men since, strangely always younger than herself, beautiful in body, you could rest assured of that. Half a dozen proper marriages, the result of her talent for the right people, had more than brushed her by. They had jostled her by, leaving her rudely aware of defeat by a hair's breadth.

The case of John Baldwin had been the last, and perhaps the most illustrative.

The years of growing intimacy with Sierra had opened wide the wide double doors of the handsome house on Madison Avenue. Repeatedly, she and the Charlottenburg had gone to dinner with Sierra and her father in the great square box of a dining room, and once for three weeks Kitty had lain in a vast spare bedroom adjoining Sierra's, recuperating from a scalp wound, the result of a fall down a dark flight of rear stairs, during one of her forays into Fourth Avenue antique shops. Her head had been bandaged, but even then there had been something peculiarly appealing in the small kitten's face peering below the swathings.

Apparently John Baldwin had thought so. For pleasant evening hours, he had sat beside her bed (mighty smart girl Sierra had picked up for a friend) playing rummy with her on the counterpane. (Mighty smart girl. Cute as a whistle too. Strange running mate for Sierra if you looked at it a certain way, but then, so was Sierra strange.)

Thoughts that never even crossed Sierra's mind had crossed Kitty's even at this time, brilliant meteor-like daring thoughts that died almost at birth.

After all, somber implications of tragedy had hung over the house then. Its mistress, even though stalking the strange hinterland of mental aberration, her outlandish memory dimmed to those who knew her closely, still had absentee hold there. Besides, the benign elderly parent of her friend was scarcely legitimate prey to her fancy.

But strangely enough, in a mild relaxed way, she had actually fancied him those days of her convalescence. There was something about the tragic captivity of a man with weather ground into his face and soil into his hands, that gripped her. The halcyon days of seeking with pickax and placer pan gone, the second half of his life entrapped him in a strange unknowable world that gave him the wistful quality of a blind man groping in a wintry garden for flowers he fancied must be there, and yet—only the dry brittle rattle of lifelessness everywhere met his touch.

Yes, there had been times then when she had felt the actual impulse of attraction toward this man, old enough to be her

father, a beaten man, hardened, and then softened. Rich, shy, frustrated, yet obviously still desiring, lacking almost everything she would have summarized as her choice, there were nevertheless actually times when the nap of her flesh rose as he touched her hand at rummy as they played it on the counterpane of her bed. Stranger than strange, she told herself.

And now, years later, it remained for Leonore Boardman, at least fifteen years older, twenty years tired, her graying blond hair refusing to take more dye, to accomplish what she, Kitty, under John Baldwin's very roof for weeks, had failed to maneuver.

Kitty Mullane, having traveled the precarious road from Kerry Patch, had been able, when that bright and scheming little head of hers had lain under John Baldwin's very roof, to do little more than succeed in wheedling him into making what transpired to be an extremely profitable investment in copper for herself and Charlottenburg.

Their pooled savings, placed in the hands of John Baldwin, whose rule of behavior was opposed to making investments for women, had resulted in the boon that had started them well on the way toward the ultimate of Twenty-one East. But compared to the brilliant plumage of the dreams that had darted through Kitty's bandaged head those weeks it had lain on the pillows in the Baldwin home, the results were not worthy of her.

In the two months following the death of Mamie Baldwin, while Kitty's mind had subconsciously been allowing itself a decent interval, Leonore Boardman had accomplished news that Kitty had heard for the first time from Sierra with a mocking persiflage that belied that shock was rocking her to her very core.

Lying there in her nest of cushions at twilight, it was memories of de Franac which almost invariably swept her emotions. But her mind deplored John Baldwin, whose life (to say nothing of her own) she was sure she could have rehabilitated more successfully than Leonore Boardman, so notoriously involved with her stepson. Toward the several quasi opportunities that had similarly jostled her by, Kitty's mind ran back on her now, into regret.

I lack what it takes to make me either hussy or virgin, she argued to herself, mostly aloud. I have the natural knack to deal in everything but the real thing. Where am I drifting? With

Charlottenburg, who is born to be what she is, and Sierra, who loves the lives of others more than she loves her own? This kind of life seems to be more their way than mine. I'm tired already, and the struggle has just begun. I want marriage and a silky world. I want beautiful leisure and beautiful people. Rivas—expensive beautifulness —

Often she shook herself out of these twilights as a spaniel shakes off water, except that they drenched her in something she did not like.

The little system of bells which Kitty had installed for the purpose of giving a thirty-minute warning of the dinner hour, rang in muffled tones. It was a pretentious device in such a household, and the Charlottenburg usually threw a pillow in its direction.

With the small leonine gesture of a little cat, Kitty threw off her pink blanket and stepped with bare feet into the white fur rug beside her bed.

"My bath, Lizette," she said aloud.

There was no Lizette and she had already had her bath.

But she liked to say it, especially the "Lizette," her tongue pushing softly against the back of her teeth in a lisp.

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## CHAPTER VI

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**T**WO spacious rooms with an intervening passageway which contained built-in drawers and a stationary washstand comprised Sierra's quarters in Twenty-one East.

That sense of fitness which was to stand Kitty in such good stead had led her to disregard her urge to design and furnish, and to suggest, instead, the intact transfer of the contents of Sierra's spacious quarters from the house on Murray Hill. In some intangible manner, this furniture, some of it overpowering, bore the odor and coloration of Sierra.

German Empire of the nineteenth century, calm resplendent mahogany of deep-toned surfaces and straight line, there did seem conformity in these pieces to the young girl growing up in the house in Murray Hill who, year after year, was to brush her smooth hair before the yew-wood chest of Chippendale style, which boasted no mirror above it, and do her rather formal kind of relaxing in the squarish eighteenth-century chairs.

Transferred to Twenty-one East, these furnishings stood somewhat stiffly away, as did Sierra, from the more Frenchified ornateness of the remainder of the house.

The period before dinner which Sierra spent in her rooms, was usually filled with duties small and factual, or given over to appointments which had overflowed her day at the settlement house.



The bifurcated negligee, or pajamas, which she had been wearing for at least fifteen years before slacks were heard of, was black sateen and of coolie design, the jacket striking her strong flat body below the strong flat hips. It enhanced the boyish planes of a figure not without its beauty, the chest square, abdomen flat, thighs without curve or accent. A good, compact, unrounded body, built more for stride than glide. A figure that men did not eye.

It was the kind of body that lent itself to good tailoring. Unrevealing tweeds hung well upon it; a double-breasted jacket, man-tailored, became it. Conventional evening gowns did nothing short of parody her handsomeness, suggesting, by their non-conformity to her lines, something of a female impersonator.

Ultimately, what might be regarded as her evening uniform, which she wore to striking effect and no little comment, resolved itself into a gray satin evening adaptation of her tailored suits. The effect of the satin blouse, its pleated bib suggesting a formal dress shirt, the soft collar and flowing tie, the boxy jacket, long, bifurcated-looking skirt, was startling to a degree never quite dissipated, even by her participation in fewer and fewer social occasions.

This manner of dress was ultimately to flood her personality with a special kind of identity which she would have gone far to prevent, had she seen it coming.

But before she had had time to realize it, her flat-bodied, clear-faced, uncompromising qualities had segregated her, even in the minds of her father and sister, who decided she was "like that," without analysis of what "like that," was, or meant.

And so, a decade and more before bifurcation in skirts became casual in women's negligee dress, Sierra at the end of her day used to slide into the relaxation of baggy Chinese trousers, usually, on the rare occasions when the three women dined alone, descending in them to dinner.

In the room directly above the one in which Kitty had been lying with cotton pads over her eyes, Sierra, in lamplight that covered her, sat deep in a low-voiced conversation with Elma Watson, who was already known as head of a settlement house she was ultimately to make world renowned.

Both women were smoking, Miss Watson, who never indulged

in public, using a long cigarette holder that curved upward like a pipe. Obviously many years older than Sierra, she was cast in the redoubtable mold of the cartoon version of social worker. Flat-footed, flat-waisted, gray-eyed, gray-haired, ascetic in her pattern of behavior, lush in her suppressed instincts she was as human as she was efficient. Stamped with the regard of the community she dominated, she brought to Sierra much of the magnetism which she exercised over the large settlement house on the lower East Side of the city.

What Elma Watson wanted was money from John Baldwin for another building similar to the annex he had donated in Mamie Baldwin's name ten years before. For three years Sierra had taught adult foreigners English in that annex. The kind of magnetized adoration which characterized the hundreds of young people who milled about the daily life of Elma Watson was now stamped on Sierra's large clear face.

Here in this woman of gray and scraggly appearance, who presided at the head of a table in a settlement house that boasted young staff members who were almost to the man and woman on their way to ultimate renown of one sort or another, was the pure flame of self-dedication.

Here, to the marvel of Sierra, was mind and spirit that apparently did not falter periodically, or sink into the abyss of a sense of the futility of trying to correct an organically wrong system by wiping a few noses or administering broth to expectant mothers, in order to enable them to bring more dirty noses onto the dirty scene.

Elma Watson saw beyond that fog of greasy soot hanging so deeply down upon the human scene, just as she apparently saw beyond the urge of her own personal life, which by now, was as selfless as an effigy's. The compulsion of that vision lay across her fascinating fanatical face, giving Sierra, as in the case of most who came under Miss Watson's floodlight gaze, a sense of piggish self-concentration.

"In urging this, I don't want to seem to be taking advantage of a personal friendship, Sierra, but since I have had no success with your father personally, I venture to press my appeal through you."

"My father has suffered immense losses, and now, as you know, there is his marriage and Leonore to consider."

"What is more important than enriching the lives of the deprived!"

"I should think Leonore would see it that way. But remember, Watson, I know my—my father's wife only slightly."

"The need is so urgent! You sit before enough half-dead adults in your evening classes, to realize to what extent we need to reach out and put more meaning into their sparse lives."

"I do, I do!"

"I am not appealing to you personally, Sierra."

"My inheritance is not yet under my control, Watson. I am still on an allowance."

"Under no circumstances would such a gift be right for you at this time. I only thought that since your father evidenced sufficient interest, years ago, to give us a building in your mother's name, now, since her death, when we are again pressed for room, he might——"

"I will ask him, but I wonder if you understand to what extent my father operates on his own, in such matters. He listens, but he is a man who depends upon his own judgments. Many people think, for instance, that this house is his gift to us. Nothing of the sort. We——"

"You need not feel called upon to explain."

"But it pleases me to explain to a person like yourself. It is true that Kitty and the Charlottenburg owe their start to investment advice from my father. Certain recent advices from him have also resulted in profits that made it possible for us to pool resources and buy this house, although he warned us that the investment could very conceivably result in loss. I very much want you to be clear about this, Watson. There is so much misapprehension about us three. People say things. I don't know whether Kitty and the Charlottenburg know or care. It doesn't matter to me, except with a few people like you—whom I love and need."

The older woman leaned over, placing her gloved hand upon Sierra's long and strong one.

"They do say things which have always rolled off me like

water off a duck's back. You're a grand person, Sierra. Even if nothing more ever comes of this talk, I'm rewarded."

"If only I were as sure as you seem to be, Watson, that a new annex is going to matter much, one way or another."

"I know, my dear! You're at a period where the flame of the torch bends in the wind. It will steady itself, and burn brighter than ever. You are a great lover, Sierra. Of people."

"There is a tiredness that goes deeper than bone-tiredness. It is soul-tiredness. It's in the eyes of my evening classes. I care and worry about that, but ——"

"I know what you're going to say. The evil lies in the system, and individual effort is too puny to help much. No. No. You are wrong! No social worker worth her salt ever dares keep her eyes on the woods. She must keep them fastened on each separate tree, or she'll throw up her hands in despair of futility. It's somebody else's job to sweat over changing the system, while we keep our eyes and brains fastened on fresh milk for little Johnny and prenatal care for Mary, who hasn't time to wait for a new system, or she'll die of the present one, meanwhile."

"Oh, Watson, give me some of your singleness of purpose. Of course, it's our job to worry about Mary and little Johnny whose rickets and rheumatic hearts won't wait for a new system. I sometimes wonder if I care about little Johnny! It's myself I seem to care about most. I need to be happy. I don't seem quite able to be. Are you, Watson?"

"Only in the way women with half-lived lives ever are or can be, Sierra."

"I don't want a half-lived life, Watson, even if it's packed with service and grandeur, like yours is. I'm second-rate. I want ——"

"You want what I, at twice your age, still want, Sierra. I've missed it. Don't you."

"The curious paradox, Watson, is that the way I'm constituted, the life I am living seems the life for me! I like my life. I love my life. It matters to me more than anything I can think of to find my compensations in the compensations of others—I love my life—except ——"

"So do I mine. But have marriage and children, Sierra, before it is too late. Then build from that platform."

"I'll talk to my father, Watson, about what you said about him and the annex."

"And talk to yourself, Sierra, about what I've said about you and those important annexes to life known as marriage, husband, children."

It was dark outside the circle of lamplight in which Sierra remained seated after Watson's departure, and almost noiselessly the trim maid-of-all-work, whom Kitty overworked and then showered with cast-off clothing, walked through it with a note, addressed to Sierra in purple ink.

It was from her father's wife, messenger-delivered, and written flowingly:

Dear Sierra, This is very advance notice, but your father and I want to be sure that you will be free to come to dinner two weeks from tonight. It is to be strictly *en famille*, that is, as *en famille* as it can be with Florence and Burl down in that ridiculous New Zealand. Suggest that you bring the Charlottenburg and Kitty instead. They amount to family, don't they? You are finally to make the acquaintance of your new "whatchamacallit," Oliver. Can you think of a better way to describe what relation you are to your stepmother's stepson? Anyway, I'll describe him as a nice boy who is sailing for New York tomorrow on the steamship "Albania." He is a bad sailor, poor dear. I am proud of my stepson and it seems absurd you two have never met. But neither, as yet, has your father met his step-stepson, so it promises to be a double reunion. After what is almost sure to be a bad crossing for him, no matter how smooth, you won't see him at his best. But his second best isn't too bad. He is enormously anxious to meet his new "whatchamacallit." And oh, Sierra, I do hope you aren't going to mind this! I've decided to do over your old rooms for Oliver. As you probably know, he is to have a position in your father's Nassau Street offices. His French and Spanish are quite good and I feel sure he can develop a South American importance for the firm, if you know what I mean. Do, Sierra, put a red circle around the day and come in a little early and stay a little late.

Leonore

P.S. That dreadful Turkish den (dust-catcher) which your father never uses, I am doing over into a darling little lace valentine of a boudoir. Assuming that you won't object to Oliver in your old rooms, the little boudoir, cozy as a nest egg, is always yours for all purposes.

It was only after what Leonore must have reasoned was the decent interlude, that here was Plow, returning from London, and in Leonore's immensely casual manner, already slated for a spot in her new husband's business.

In spite of herself, a fierce protective impulse flowed through Sierra. She was learning from countless small instances that it was typical of Leonore, who did most things with the subtlety of satin, thus to introduce Oliver permanently into the scene. Apparently she had left the home to her father and his wife, only to give leeway for the introduction of Oliver into her very rooms! This was false reasoning and Sierra knew it. She had left the house in Murray Hill because this marriage of her father's released her from it! Actually, in a way, having Oliver there compensated for her defection. She preferred not to think of those rooms of hers, empty.

There were sufficient empty rooms in her father's life. There was that untenanted section of him which had once housed Mamie. There were the empty rooms of Florence and, yes, of herself. Somehow they both had failed him. There were the empty rooms of his spirit.

Ever since her judgments had become adult, she had thought of her father that way. A large edifice, only half tenanted; the corridors of his being draughty with nostalgias for what he had never known, most of the rooms empty, or empty of what they had once had. The vanished and incredible vividness of Mamie Trehane, of Silver Spoon, must have left drab vacancies. Leonore, with half her vividness, and even discounting the rumor that she was in love with her stepson, could not people that emptiness, any more than Mamie, who had also failed.

Mixed in with all this inchoate resentment, Sierra wondered no little about Oliver. A framed photograph of him on her father's wife's dressing table provoked, by its very effeteness, something in her she did not begin to understand. The delicate face of bony surfaces, lips beneath a light-colored mustache that were too

rich and full and immature for the face, attentive-looking eyes, and the thin indolent body of a man who could cross his legs sinuously and then wind one foot about the other ankle. The faint smile, the lean cheeks, the eyes long and not more than half open, resulted in the sensitive look almost invariable to such face molding.

It was a photograph that, whenever she glanced at it, caused Sierra to remember a story that clung to the name. About a year before the death of his father, and at a time when Leonore's infatuation for her stepson was already small gossip, he had been formally engaged to a Miss Jessica Plant, daughter of Jessie Plant, celebrated animal painter. Two weeks before the wedding, she had fallen headlong to her death from a window of her eighth floor apartment. The accidental nature of this tragedy had been somehow established, but its implications lingered on. Plow had failed her terribly and even back there the implications were bound up with Leonore.

A bit later young Plow had gone to Ceylon on business pertaining to his father's interests there.

That face on the photograph on her father's wife's table was one to set pain in motion in women! Something of it stirred in Sierra on those not very frequent occasions when she found herself in Leonore's part of the house in Murray Hill.

It would seem strange to think of Oliver occupying the rooms in which the strange years of a strange girl, growing up in a strange household, had been spent. His long graceful body would lie on its bed at night, surrounded by the same walls and timbers that had enclosed the life of her girlhood.

Trying to forbid herself the thought, Sierra could nevertheless feel and experience to the full Oliver lying there, in a room that must still be packed with her imprint.

She shuddered and rose as Kitty's ridiculous dressing bell began to ring.

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## CHAPTER VII

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KITTY had kept the dining room pale and slender with the lovely lines of Hepplewhite and Sheraton. Just how it had occurred to her to blend into this scheme maple chairs of the Federal period, a sideboard of the Louis Philippe type which had so influenced early America, struck amazement into the Charlottenburg.

"What's bothering you, Charlottenburg? It's a slick and lovely little dove's wing of a room, isn't it?"

"I don't know a hoot in hell about the Hepplewhites and Sheratons, a plague on both their houses, but there's strange bed-fellows in this dining-room set. It didn't come whole. You must have looted every Fourth Avenue shop and auction room in seven states."

This did not succeed, however, in eliciting from Kitty the simple explanation that she had seen the various pieces standing huddled outside the entrance to one of Fourth Avenue's used furniture shops, and had decided that the accidental ensemble of furniture being unloaded from van to showroom, had rhythm and grace.

There was an odd armchair, Savery type, with a vase-shaped back (made in Philadelphia, 1750) at the head of the table for Charlottenburg.



Even then, as the Charlottenburg's round face began to show, moonlike, above breasts which already, like two cheese bags, were beginning to droop toward her waistline, she was pre-empting the matriarchal spot in the household.

Already, as her figure widened, her habits of dress were those of a dowager. The black silk gown with its touch of lace which she invariably wore at dinner was cut slightly low on the deep white flesh of her bosom; the high psyche of her beginning-to-gray hair, an exclamation point, as it were, to the expository force of her manner.

Her small face pert with the zest with which she regarded even the most casual evening, Kitty, in her place once removed from the Charlottenburg's left, flashed her high relentless note of gaiety. There was never an instant, so it seemed to Sierra, that Kitty lost sight of her tickling sense of contrast with the Charlottenburg. It was not only with her laughter, which, compared to the throaty guffaw of the Charlottenburg, was clear as the tinkle of the crystal chandelier prisms above her head. It was in the small, birdlike quickness of her mauve-gloved hands; the flash of the tiny sequins on the bandeau in her short hair; the rustle of her pink taffeta (her own handmade copy of a French model worn by her friend, Elsie Pretorious) with its tiny puff sleeves ending in rosettes on the slender upper half of her arm. They were the perfect complement, one to the other to the other; Charlottenburg, Kitty and Sierra.

That was the triumvirate of them. Ladies at the turn of a century that was to somersault them, in their ruffled panties, button shoes and laced corsets, into an era more receptive to their assorted talents.

The guests at the dinner table, for which the dressing bell had rung so pretentiously, were the young Tommy Scott, Kitty's adonoidal scion of a rich house, and her very silent partner in a plan to win from his father, head of a corporation chain of tea-rooms, a commission to restock them in American-made pottery designed after the famous French Brittany ware of Quimper; Peter Niemann, who had resigned the pastorate of a Brooklyn Presbyterian church to become actor; the heavy-set unpoetic looking young poet, Robert Shevlin; and, true to Kitty's surmise,

a Miss Esther Feinman, executive secretary of the Snaith Home for Wayward Girls, Sierra's nearsighted and guiltless of folderol gift to the occasion.

During a meal planned and modified by Kitty from the dinner menu of a famous Fifth Avenue house which had appeared in the society columns, the Charlottenburg, over two helpings of Consomme de Tortue (mock), Chauffroid de Caneton (duck with applesauce), Babas rhum (from a tiny Lexington Avenue bake-shop, discovered by Kitty and later exploited by her), boomed over discussions which ranged from Klondike, President McKinley, the current best seller, *Quo Vadis*, Philippine War, John Philip Sousa, to Elsie de Wolfe in *A Pair of Ghosts*, rainy-day suits and the social debut of Ruth, daughter of Mark Hanna.

The plump young chick of a poet read from himself and Yeats, in order named. Peter Niemann, who asked for a whisky and soda with his soup, then two, then three, sank slowly into the depressed lethargy characteristic of him in his cups, while Miss Feinman, in a plaid frock stitched with rows of black velveteen ribbon, peered with her tired office eyes a little too brightly into the occasion, flushing violently when addressed by anyone besides Sierra. The mauve-gloved hands of Kitty, her earliest trade-mark of eccentricity, fluttered with their unquenchable vivaciousness, as if waving the way to a future of more select and more important dinner parties.

It was stranger than strange, this home back there in the beginning of the century, when the rakish term "bachelor girl" was brightly new; when young women with unrouged lips wore button shoes, high-busted corsets, and gold watches pinned to shirtwaists; when they painted on china and taught kindergarten; when heavy, heavy hung the threat of spinsterhood over the unmarried twenty-two-year-old head.

This house, number Twenty-one East, occupied by three unchaperoned women and already the nucleus for assorted varieties from social and professional walks of American and Continental life, was local phenomenon.

No man who entered there, certainly not the young Robert Shevlin or Peter Niemann or legions of those to come, left it free of a sort of tantalized askance.

What was this setup? What did it mean? Three women, thus. Old battle-ax. The kitten. The sainted-looking one with eyes such as the old Italians painted into their Marys. What was this setup? Orthodox or—or not? What was expected of a man? How far dared he go? Who slept with whom ——?

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## CHAPTER VIII

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THERE were few, if any, personal or personable reasons which made Stafford Pretorious important on the various lists which Kitty kept in carefully edited form in a small morocco-bound book, which closed with a lock and key.

At twenty-three, pallid, with thinning hair and growing bulk, he was already the victim of a nervous affliction which caused him to blink his eyes in rapid paroxysms. This, as it became more and more marked, began to jeopardize his position with a veteran firm of Wall Street brokers, who, taking him in on the strength of his connections, were to learn later how remote his contacts with that branch of the Pretorious family which for generations had maintained a position of wealth and power in city and state.

As a matter of fact, financial reverses were already vitiating even the major branches of the family. The name no longer adorned boards of trustees, governors and directors, but managed to survive on the membership lists of preferred clubs, and the older headwaiters of the older "best places" still paid obsequies and led the way to preferred tables.

Ignatius Mabie, philanthropist and donor of library buildings, with his name cut deeply into their marble porticos, was cousin, twice removed, to Stafford's father, who had risked his all and

sunk his all in Klondike gold. But that too proved to be an uninterested and unindulgent connection which led nowhere.

There was one asset, however, which in Kitty's opinion made him valuable to her. Stafford was the godson of Elsie (Mrs. Tommy Tweed) Pretorious. If your goals were the kind of places toward which Kitty's small feet were unswervingly directed, the dowager member of a family whose social and financial prestige went deeply into the railroad history of the country became a red pin upon the map of intention and purpose.

It is true that Elsie Pretorious thought little, if anything, of this remote godson of hers who was the youngest child of an impecunious third cousin and whose coloring, she once declared, reminded her of a white-of-egg surmounted by yolk-yellow hair.

Along with a large contingent of other outpost relations, Stafford attended the famous Christmas annuals of his dowager godmother, when two hundred guests seated themselves at table in the baronial dining hall of her town house.

It took Kitty exactly two days, after meeting Stafford, to learn quite accidentally by way of him that his godmother was fond of hand-wrought jewelry, the vocational art she had acquired at night classes, and another week to accomplish, by way of him, an invitation to tea at the town house of Elsie Pretorious.

Somewhat aghast at thus being prodded into an aggressiveness uncharacteristic of him, Stafford, who had not seen his godmother in the months since her last Christmas celebration, wrote her a note which surprised her with a quality she had never before noted in her undistinguished godson.

What had actually happened was that, unable to find a way out under the pressure of this extraordinary Kitty Mullane who had suddenly fastened her glittering interest upon his godmother, Stafford had written the note with the flavor of Kitty's talk clinging to his mind and pen.

Dear Godmother,

I have met a lady who is sufficiently interesting to warrant my asking you to invite us to tea. As you know, being your godson is my great social and everything-else asset. No, the situation is not what you might think. She is considerably older than I, and we do not interest one another

that way. I met her at the home of Guy Andrews, the scenic artist who has done sets for James O'Neil, Mary Mannering, Julia Marlowe, Leslie Carter and several Gus Thomas plays. Among her many interests are jewelry and costume designing. May I bring her to one of your Fridays or any other day you may designate? Her name is Kitty Mullane. She is one of three very interesting women who have established themselves together. You may have heard of two of them. That heavy-set Miss Charlotte Ames (yes, the right Ames) who looks like a cross between a Tammany alderman, a baby-elephant, and a Buddha, and is about the most original woman in town. And then, John Baldwin's daughter Sierra, quite a saint, or at least she looks like one, and who had that crazy mother who wore red plush and diamonds to breakfast after John Baldwin began to show up ore in the pan. To me the most interesting member, by all odds, of this queer assortment is this Kitty Mullane. Aside from the fact that she is a silver-smith and jewelry maker, sells her handmade pieces to Wanamaker and Altman and Black, Starr and Frost (which Cellini profession should appeal to you), she's a real new person, although she says of herself that she has no background and is all front. She thinks you are topping and is crazy to meet you. Your godson awaits permission to bring her to you.

Staf

Later, when the two had met and were calling one another by their first names, Elsie confided to Kitty that this was not only the first legible, but the first literate letter she had ever received from her godson.

"That, more than his word-picture of you three charming witches, was what moved me to tell my young parasitic bore to trot you along that foul Thursday afternoon I was laid up with bronchitis."

Foul was the word. It was the last kind of day Kitty, who had feline antipathy for damp, would have chosen for this excursion into the awareness of this important dowager. Sensitive to atmospheric pressure, her mood rising or drooping with it, she drove

to the hour of her appointment, shivering alongside Stafford in their hansom cab.

"Your godmother is sure to hate me today. I bought this darling blue-velvet bird's nest of a hat just for the occasion, but now in this dirty weather I look like a hag out of hell and feel like two. God, how Kitty hates feeling damp, Staf. Kitty just hates feeling damp."

He wondered why he had no impulse, there in the twilight of the hansom, to gather her, as he would have upon any similar occasion, into the arm toward which she leaned. Simultaneously the thought raced over Kitty: Lord, not even this chippie-chaser could she rouse! Not, God knows, she assured herself, that she wanted to, except—good Lord—not even this—chaser——

The cab lurched them together and as she glanced up into his face, he turned, took her by the underarms, and plopped her back into place.

"Sorry. Hump of a hack."

The idea! This egg-white young man, the sort who pinched the thighs of serving maids, now sat stiffly within the damp twilight of the cab, his body held tense against the possibility of lurch in the direction of the small body that had just lurched against his. The idea!

He began to whistle softly, from a Broadway success: "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden, Are There Any More at Home Like You?" The third from the right of the Floradora Sextette lay on his consciousness like a thick sweet perfume. What a girl! Thighs the shape of a lyre. "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden, Are There Any More at Home Like You?"

"There are a few, kind sir," said Kitty, tilting her intelligent blue eyes beneath her carefully matched blue-velvet toque.

He did not hear her, because they were drawing up before the stone mausoleum of the Pretorious-Tweeds, and he was fumbling for hack fare.

"Haven't you change? Here, I have it, dear," she said and slipped him coins from her chatelaine bag.

He needed to reckon in cab fares, and yet he hated her doing that. Women somehow didn't. Except "new women." She was one of those. Ugh!

At that period, although she was never to admit it in years to

come, Kitty considered the old Pretorious-Tweed mansion on Fifth Avenue, which was already beginning to be nudged by invading business establishments, a culmination in residential achievement.

The gray-haired negro butler in maroon satin breeches who opened one-half of the ponderous front door; the pouring smell of tufted elegance impressed her. The gas-lit chandeliers burning in the early twilight illuminated through their frosted globes a scene which by its very ugliness challenged her reverence.

This musty and dated elegance might denote the encroaching shabby gentility of what had once been a great house; but just the same, such chromo grandeur was a challenge to those less sure of position. The Pretorious-Tweeds set, rather than followed, the pace. The Pretorious-Tweed mansion made it right, by its might, to be stale with old plush, to be horrific with dado and dodad, to be as cluttered as an old swamp with dying and dead interior vegetations of gone days.

Entering that somber house was almost literally a first step into a world that was the hot bun in the bakeshop show window to the chilly little girl on the sidewalk, pressing her nose against the plate glass.

Stafford, generally so slow at perceptions, sensed this, however, because no sooner had they arrived than he took on the jaunty air of one at home here, which he was not, for he entered only at his godmother's not frequent bidding.

As a matter of fact, Elsie Pretorious herself might have been assembled out of the ornate jumble of her immense drawing room. As curlicue in bulging hips and bosom as her divans, as warmly plush as her upholstery, as cluttered as her whatnots, bows sat in her hair, chains on her neck, furbelows at her throat. Veined hands, dotted with liver spots, darted among her tea things. Fringed bangs over a mandatory brow accented a face packed with lines. To cap all this effect, her throat, this damp and dismal twilight, was frankly bound in several thicknesses of red flannel, against the bronchitis which gave her voice a series of miscellaneous registers.

Impervious to anything so deeply personal as curiosity, or even surprise, the advent of Kitty into her ailing afternoon was as casual as the falling twilight or the high tea which a butler was



spreading before a fireplace. Lace curtains, well-starched and beautifully mended (in the same obtrusive fashion that the stockings worn by Elsie Pretorious were mended), and velvet overdrapes with ball fringe, shut out the twilight scene through which the hack had just delivered Kitty and Stafford.

At their entrance, a pair of overweight pug dogs rose from the voluminous folds of Elsie's none too carefully assembled tea gown of brown bengaline, and stood snoring with their eyes open.

A Sargent portrait of Elsie, younger and slimmer, and a balancing one of the late walrus-like Tommy Tweed, dominated the room. Another of their daughter, Mrs. Marshall Merlinghausen of Philadelphia, a younger more gracious chip off her mother, hung between a pair of windows. Security here, embedded in musty magnificence. Sureness here, that was different from the sureness of Charlottenburg, who had her tongue in her cheek.

While the Charlottenburg crackled with her own sureness of the foibles of the world she lived in, Elsie stewed in the flaccid security of a social smugness that enveloped her and her pugs like a sea of warm oatmeal. Warm plush. Warm flannel at Elsie's old throat. Warm and snoring pugs.

At last! Here she was, Kitty Mullane erstwhile of Kerry Patch, an invited guest in the home of the Pretorious-Tweeds; one who was being ushered across the threshold by a butler who expected her. Here she was, drinking chocolate through a fuzz of whipped cream, with a social dowager whose place was so secure that she dared to reign with red flannel her diadem, a hassock her footrest, her carpet-upholstered mahogany chair a throne against a background of geegaw, whatnot and chromo for which the attic and dustbins yawned.

Back in Kitty's Kerry days, when this dowager was fifteen years younger, newspaper photographs of her as a hostess and youngish matron had from time to time been pasted in the scrapbook of this Mullane child, living in a wooden packing case of a house, and the book kept hidden beneath the thin mattress of a bed she shared with four Mullane youngsters.

There were traces of that handsome Elsie Pretorious still to be glimpsed in this ruin of a dowager. Back in the days when the Mullanes rushed the growler in Kerry Patch, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* had run a series of photographs of Elsie's famous Bird-

of-Paradise party at Islip, Long Island, and the young Kitty Mullane had reproduced it in her back yard, requisitioning all available neighborhood lace curtains and adult finery with which to drape the lank bodies of Kerry Patch children. She had been soundly trounced for confiscating her mother's one pitiful bit of finery, an ostrich plume that had seen its better days on the bonnet of a Lindell Boulevard matron for whom Mother Mullane did fine laundry. Pop Mullane, coming home a bit the worse for wear, had goddamned all over the bird-of-paradise function, until even the Kerry Patch youngsters, whose ears were attuned to rancid colloquialism, had scattered.

A flash of that memory, as she sat here with Elsie Pretorious drinking chocolate out of Spode cups, so tickled her risibilities that after the first few moments of introduction and small talk, a puckish impulse swept over Kitty to divest herself of the mantle of formality and fling herself into an imitation of that Kitty Mullane wrapped in lace curtaining, prancing through her Kerry Patch version of the Pretorious Bird-of-Paradise party.

It would have been a good imitation by a rousing good mime, but badly timed, and it was a saving grace of Kitty's that her instinct seldom let her impulses get the best of her.

You didn't pounce in on Elsie Pretorious, who took her five o'clock hot chocolate ritualistically. A dowager beholden to nothing beyond her own whims could easily be grated the wrong way by the sort of intruder she could so easily expect from her nincompoop godson.

Kitty did not propose to take that risk, although there was temptation to gamble on capturing this lady by a provocative start.

Kitty would have admired herself for doing it. Had she done it, would have felt herself the sort of person she desired to be. She would have liked to have related to the Charlottenburg that she had done it. But being the person she was, cautious as a pretty cat, she passed by the zany impulse to crash into the Pretorious world by doing an imitation of herself imitating Elsie.

The entry which Kitty had made into her memorandum book concerning this appointment with Elsie Pretorious would have been cryptic to the outsider. But the Charlottenburg, peeping,

could have translated it offhand. Sierra, perhaps. It read: Thursday. Five. Tea, Stafford. Elsie Pretorious. Cat's-eye.

Cat's-eye jewelry, wrought in a tiny studio shop which Kitty, at infinitesimal rent, maintained in conjunction with a bookbinding friend, had met success with such emporiums as Arnold Constable, Altmans; and an exclusive Fifth Avenue jewelry shop had commissioned her for odd pieces.

Her most successful brooch was a circlet of silver leaves which formed the mounting for a cat's-eye. The original was exhibited in a small glass case in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, the name of a Fifth Avenue jeweler in gilt lettering, and a small typewritten card beside the brooch, reading: Cat's-eye and old silver. By Mullane.

A duplicate of this successful brooch held the soft fichu at Kitty's throat and caught darts of Pretorious firelight.

"How's your aunt Sally?" inquired the dowager of her godson, snapping large segments of cinnamon bun into her mouth with disregard for crumminess down her front.

"She's in Saratoga Springs, with Uncle Hal and two of the girls."

"New faces, not Saratoga, is what it takes to get those girls husbands. Ever been to Saratoga, Miss—er—a ——"

"Mullane, Cousin Elsie."

"Foul at names, excuse me, Miss—er—a ——?"

"No, I've never been to Saratoga."

What she did not add, was that she intended to go, and was already negotiating with the United States Hotel to display her cat's-eye successes in a lobby showcase.

"Can't understand why my feeble-minded sister-in-law should hustle her unattractive daughters to Saratoga out of season. Besides, Saratoga without horses is beer without skittles, whatever skittles are."

"Out in St. Louis, my grandfather used to go out for his beer on a Saturday night and come home the worse for wear and shedding watery tears, because in America he couldn't play skittles with his beer in the good old Erin fashion."

"I thought skittles were something to eat, like fish and chips, whatever they are."

"You come to our home some evening when you are in a

cockney mood, and we'll have fish and chips!" said Kitty, already beginning to design a future relationship with Elsie.

"You're English?"

"Except for a streak of Cornish on the maternal side, I'm shanty Irish."

"A little feathered thing like you, shanty!"

"Just a touch of lace-curtain Irish, from my mother's side, thrown in. But getting back to fish and chips. Perhaps you'll dine with us some evening. Beer and chips won't be our only lure. If you don't fancy them, we've always bees' tongues or nightingales' wings on hand."

All this was Kitty's fancy little high button shoe, with its patent-leather scrollwork, already wedging her way in. This invitation was her quick lien on future meetings with Elsie Pretorious. It was her characteristic leap ahead.

"You should see the bachelor girl setup at Miss Mullane's, God-mother."

"Three old maids of us trying to put on a front."

"I admire a certain amount of all this new-woman independence you hear about. I don't believe in a woman spoiling her sexiness by the vote, or anything like that, but within bounds, I'm for women going places."

"Not all can choose. Some have to go."

"Take my sister-in-law's stepdaughter, Mellie Morehaus. You know, the San Francisco Morehauses. If her grandmother ever decides to die, that girl stands to inherit four million. What does she do, but decide to fill in her spare time by drying rose leaves and selling sachet bags for Christmas presents. I bought eight, and did they smell! I hope to God she's decent enough and discreet enough to give the money to charity. Mellie has cosmic urge."

"Poor me, I'm not sure if that's what I have, but I dry my kind of rose leaves for a living too, but I dry them in order to eat."

"Well, your friend, John Baldwin's daughter, certainly doesn't have to dry rose leaves in order to eat, does she? I hear he's made an arrangement that takes care of his daughters before his death. Lucky for them now that Leonore Boardman has landed him."

"Sierra Baldwin has the real cosmic itch! She's a carer. Really cares about the human race, humanity as such, if you know what I mean."

"M-m-m. Not sure that I do. But come to think about it, John Baldwin lost a powerful lot of money even before Leonore Boardman married him for what was left. Or don't you bachelor girls gossip about one another, any more than a man would gossip about his sweetheart? Sometimes girls will be boys, y'know."

"Godmother!"

A strange color flowed across the face of Miss Mullane, who said nothing.

"Tut, have I made a break? Well, excuse an old woman. You know what I meant to say."

"You couldn't gossip about Sierra Baldwin, Mrs. Tweed, any more than you could about the Himalaya Mountains. She's one of nature's peaks."

The coolly insensate eyes of Elsie Pretorious turned on Kitty, as so many eyes turned upon her. Suddenly, in a sort of flooding pleasure, as if at the sound of a melody or a pleasant sight.

"Why, you cute dear, I think you're smart!"

"Didn't I tell you she was, Godmother?"

"No. You merely asked me to meet someone who sounded tiresome. Tell me, Miss Mullaly, what do you especially do? What rose leaves do you dry?"

"Among other things I make jewelry," said Kitty, her hand lying relaxed against her fichu.

"That pretty thing at your throat?"

"Yes. I've been thinking ever since I entered this room, how perfectly moonstones would go with your coloring. They're good luck, you know."

"They must be. The only ones I ever owned were shirtwaist buttons given to me by my mother-in-law three weeks before she died."

"Would you accept this brooch? From me? It matches your lovely coloring so much better than it does mine. I'd love to give it to you," said Kitty, unpinning it and handing it across the coffee tray. "There are so few cat's-eye people. Some day I'm going to dream a whole set of them for you."

"You made this by hand. Wonderful! The cat's-eye looks like a star sapphire. I've a passion for star sapphires."

A racing thought went through Kitty's head, causing it to jerk backward like a pony's pulled sharply up.

"Star sapphires! I saw a dream the other day in Olin's. A gorgeous milky beauty with the star high up in her. You would be angelic in it! Let me dream you a star sapphire necklace."

"But my dear Miss Mullins, star sapphires cost a king's ransom!"

"Don't be practical. Don't, please don't. I can't bear the vision of you in star sapphires, ruined by you being practical."

"Tush, my dear! Don't let your imagination run away with you. Tekla Spear has a star sapphire, not much larger than chicken feed, that she paid eleven thousand for, if it's paid for. If my Oklahoma oil doesn't stop pouring down into hell instead of spouting upward, I'll be fortunate to wear a pussy willow tiara."

"Don't worry about the money, my dear. Let little Kitty do your thinking and scheming. She's going to give you reason to remember her right name."

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## CHAPTER IX

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SIX mornings a week, before eight o'clock, three breakfasts were delivered on immaculate trays by the vigorously trained small maid, a graduate in precision of Kitty's relentless tutelage.

Sunday mornings were the exception. At ten-thirty during the winter, the card table in Charlottenburg's office-living room was opened up before a coal fire and spread to the perfection demanded by Kitty. A Honitan lace cover over yellow sateen. Frail daffodil-design china, painted by Kitty. The smell of steam off hot muffins being opened for a slide of butter.

Kitty, on these Sunday mornings which she intended to establish as tradition, loved to breakfast in a pink woolly bed jacket that encased her as softly and warmly as a sachet bag. Never lost upon her was the contrast of Sierra, her face calm above a gray wool bathrobe, and of the Charlottenburg, shirtwaisted and doing quick justice to three two-minute eggs, whose heads she slashed off with a stroke of her knife and drank from the shell.

These clearing-house breakfasts constituted a weekly balance of affairs and experiences. It was pleasant to loll over muffins piled with marmalade, sip hot coffee—with the exception of Kitty who never drank it or tea—and verbally thumb back and forth over the record of the week's events.

This Sunday morning, a luminous object, surrounded by three women at breakfast, lay on the lace cloth.

The color and size of half a frosty grape, it shot off a shy milky sort of radiance, its star burning down into its depths.

"My little lavender dove has swallowed the evening star," whispered Kitty, leaning over it.

"A little lavender piece of loot has swallowed your blarney, hook and bait," remarked the Charlottenburg, crackling toast along her vigorous teeth. "How you managed to extract, on consignment, one 'grade-A' star sapphire from a firm like Olin and Collins, without so much as leaving your virtue or something more negotiable as collateral, is beyond me. Kitty Mullane, who makes arty lapis-lazuli-and-silver breast pins, goes suddenly star sapphire on a shoestring."

"On good straight business thinking," interposed Sierra.

"That from you, my dear Sierra, is praise from Caesar. It was both good and straight, if I do say so. I went to Olin himself. Never mind how I bribed, pined, whined, and tarried for three days of waiting to reach him. You remember the evening I pawned off the little girl who paints velvets on you for dinner, when I couldn't get home in time for dinner with her, Charlottenburg?"

"Yes, so do I remember my chicken pox."

"That was the evening the office boy tipped me off that Peter Olin was to be in his office late, and I waited in his anteroom until eleven and caught him!"

"Whereupon, my shy little woodland sprite," remarked the Charlottenburg, suiting action to word, "I shall light myself a cigar."

"And please note, Charlottenburg *mia*, that all this was accomplished with no collateral beyond my frank young Kerry Patch face, the address of my one-room, one-man organization in semi-precious jewels, and with not so much as a cheep from me, so help me, concerning the rarefied Baldwin-Ames setup in which I dwell."

"Did you achieve all this with your sex or your brains?"

"Charlottenburg, must you," said Sierra, her straight eyes flecked with a kind of reluctant amusement.

"I'm afraid she must, Sierra. Her mind works like that."

"At least it works."

"Yum, yum, my beautiful starlight, starlit darling," cried Kitty,



scooping up her jewel. "Kiss Mullane! You are going to lie on a dingy Pretorious neck, but it cannot dim your splendor."

"There was never a Pretorious neck that looked washed."

"My job is star sapphires, not necks."

"And you're doing it grandly, Kitty."

"Good God, Sierra," snapped the Charlottenburg, "who says she isn't doing it grandly. She's already done the grandest part. Any female without a harelip who can beard old Peter Olin in his den and emerge with her virtue and a two-thousand-dollar sapphire, is going places."

"On consignment—don't forget."

"On any terms, except rape."

"If I must admit it, Charlottenburg, your ittzie-bittzie Kitty was never even propositioned."

"Ittzie-bittzie Kittzie is boring the hell out of not-so-ittzie-bittzie Charlottenburg, with her ittzie-bittzie talk."

"If you ask me," said Sierra, biting into a muffin which steamed up into her face, "I think you are both pretty tiresome."

"Sufficiently tiresome to have made a pair of men a pair of good wives."

"No, we aren't. That's our difficulty. We just don't know how to be that tiresome."

"Horse sense, beneath pussy clothing, is one way of doing it, Charlottenburg. I'm not so sure Kitty's isn't the supremely clever way."

"There's a thought! Our Kit in horse-sense clothing, when all the time I thought she believed in Santa Claus and talked angel-patter with the little pixies down at the bottom of the garden."

"Kitty does, Charlottenburg. That's what makes her as clever as she is fluffy."

"Sierra likes ittzie-bittzie Kitty!"

"I do! I think you're a velvet little lamb in horse-sense overalls."

"Hand me my knitting bag, Sierra," said the Charlottenburg, "so I can swear softly into my purling. The two of you make me very sick, very tired and very bored. You're a couple of maladjusted females trying to square yourselves with yourselves by way of a lot of fake analytical nonsense that you wouldn't have time for if you were hemming diapers."

"Are you thinking wishfully, Charlottenburg *mia*?"

"Good heavens," cried Sierra, "don't you two old maids ever tire of whistling in the dark?"

"You and the Charlottenburg aren't whistling in the dark, Sierra. It's me making all that noise around the house. I really want to be cozy. Not you two! You and the Charlottenburg have had enough of it in your lives not to feel cold to the core as I do. I want to be cozy and rosy and loved, the way a baby, waking up in a pink blanket, is cozy and rosy. I'm tired. I never had enough of anything. Not even enough mother's milk, because my mother was blue with anemia ten years before she died. Never enough of anything—clothing, blankets, candy, love, beauty. That's what I missed most and that's what I want most. Beauty and love and plenty of each. Beauty and love not named in the order of their importance, because they both come first. Hanging star sapphires along even a wattled old neck is a kind of attempt at beauty. Sierra's strange still face looking at me is a kind of beauty. The sunlight showing up the transparency of that eggshell, which the Charlottenburg has disgustingly sucked empty, is a kind of beauty. Even I, in this cruel morning light, with the lines all out in my thirty-ish looking face, and my eyes too old from wanting things too passionately, am a kind of beauty; the beauty of being lean and unsatiated and eternally hungry. Lean for love. Dying for love."

"For God's sake, Kitty, stop the exposure. It embarrasses me to listen!"

"Leave Kitty be, Charlottenburg. It's not embarrassing exposure at all. Kit is like that eggshell on the table, with the sun on it. Transparent and lovely in spite of everything that's been done to it."

"That eggshell was sucked by me! And as for Kits' transparency, I prefer to spend my energies trying to see through pea-soup fog."

"Charlottenburg, how tender you are!"

"Never mind, Kits. It isn't becoming to the Charlottenburg style of beauty to wear her tenderness on her sleeve."

"—or up her sleeve, while you two talk rubbish."

"Just the same, I hate your being lean and hungry for the things you've missed, Kits, I——"

"Lean and hungry for love, did you say, and beauty? What

about hungry for a little kippered herring!" interpolated the Charlottenburg, her eyes small, amused and sardonic.

"Kippered herring," cried Kitty, her expression pricking up, "wait a minute, there. In spite of yourself, I think you've said something!"

"The Kitten's forthright little mind must be working somewhat like this: kippered herring breakfasts could start a fad and become town talk among our local idiots."

"There's more than idea there, Charlottenburg! There's inspiration," cried Kitty. "'Miss Ames, Miss Baldwin and Miss Mullane at home, Sundays. Twelve o'clock breakfast. Kippered herring.'"

"Guaranteed to dispel that morning-after taste with a worse one."

"Oh, Charlottenburg, suppose I hadn't ever found you! Suppose I were not living with the Charlottenburg and the High Sierra in Twenty-one East! Suppose!"

"The answer to that," observed the Charlottenburg to her knitting needles, "is either engraved across eternity or written on a pinhead. Both equally illegible to our aging eyes. . . ."

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## CHAPTER X

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GOING to dine in her father's home and the new dominion which Leonore had created there, was still a disturbing, not to say upsetting, experience. Invariably Sierra braced herself for the occasion, facing with dread the ordeal of entering, as guest, the house which had been the citadel of her schoolgirl years, and over which she had presided ever since, as a horrified child, she had beheld her mother half-carried, her heels dragging, out of the home to that big house on a hill from which she had never returned.

You could count upon Leonore, who made her moves as slowly as a chess player, to make the transition from gloom to brightness in the brooding brownstone rectangle of a house. Manned by servants grown dictatorial through lack of interference, indifferently presided over by a disembodied spirit of a man who spent less than half his time in it and hardly mussed the bed sheets he slept between, its squareness suggested its rigidity.

The transition of this large brown impersonal household came with a minimum of shock even to the servants, who were to awaken to what had happened to them only after they had been eased out to make way for a younger staff.

It is doubtful if Baldwin himself ever quite realized what had happened to him, any more than he remembered the day of the

year upon which he became one year older. Suddenly, as if by the raising of a shade, life had brightened and for reasons that, under analysis, might have been rejected by him as high nonsense. Yet when Leonore, operating in swift, oiled and ball-bearing manner, lightened and brightened the scene with gewgaw and fandangle, sun-colored brocade and new lamps everywhere—well—well—Lord, what a woman!

Those mighty fine fringed velour drapes over the entire first floor had cost a pretty penny back in the days when Mamie had written her *carte blanche* across London. But no use talking, Leonore's substitution of new lace curtains, with light silk overdrapes, did something to brighten a man as he entered his house, where instead of hanging his hat on a black walnut hatrack with antlers, he now handed it to a flunkey who disappeared with it.

Baldwin, at this period, would tell you that horses, God bless them, would remain in his stable as long as God made little apples, automobile shenanigans to the contrary notwithstanding. But it was surprising what ground Leonore could cover with that little electric cab of hers, in which she skittled about like a glider bug.

To be sure, a man put his foot down once in a while. It had taken days to find out what had become of the bootblack box which Leonore had banished from his bedroom. Baldwin had blacked his own shoes all his life, down to spitting on the brush, and he didn't intend to quit now. And there was Leonore's plan to remove Eup, the handyman, from the room he had occupied for years over the stable, for his refusal to eliminate chewing tobacco when on the premises. Baldwin had nipped that. "Eup and I staked claims together for fifteen years. It was accident which one won. Eup stays and spits." But in the main—Lord, what a woman!

It was this measured manner with which her father's wife accomplished metamorphosis, which helped create in Sierra a feeling that every improvement was a reflection on the long years when she had lived at home and permitted the old manse to stew in its brown juices, whereas Leonore with an urban and urbane gaiety, had let in sunlight and elegance.

That unspoken indictment, subtle, unemphasized by Leonore,

smote her every time she entered the newly brightened portals of a house that had once glowered.

The evening of the dinner of welcome to Oliver Plow was no exception. With something of premature dread mixed with a small buzz of excitement, Sierra fastened herself into the gray evening gown that differed only slightly in design from the tweeds she wore by day.

Charlottenburg had not wanted to attend this dinner and announced it with the forthrightness of which she was so cuttingly capable.

"I've seen too many Boardmans on the make, to get a thrill out of meeting your father's wife at dinner. If I were sure Kitty could wheedle some fancy investment information out of your pap, without me at her side to call her down if she puts it on too thick, I'd unharness this overweight hulk of mine, put on the old carpet slippers and stay at home and read bad plays by bad authors who think agents exist in order to sell such plays, otherwise known as tripe, to producers."

"What I want to go and see for myself," said Kitty, "is how Leonore walked in where this angel feared to tread, and then stalked off like a satisfied tiger with the Baldwin lamb between her teeth."

Flanked by this pair of redoubtables, the procedure of re-entering her father's house on this occasion became easier.

Kitty, *bouffant* in a taffeta-and-net gown, which she had contrived from odds and ends left over from a room she had decorated for the head of the jewelry department of a Brooklyn department store, Charlottenburg, a sort of travesty of a matriarch, prematurely mature, foursquare in rigid black ribbed silk, and the dove-quiet Sierra, massed up into a trilogy that even then was making their names inseparable and eyebrow-raising!

It was as if Leonore, who constituted a committee of one to greet them in the drawing room which, not inviting Kitty's assistance, she had redone, summoned every ounce of herself to withstand the force of the combination.

Her tall figure, its silhouette young, but the flesh on it old and tough, and draped on a low-cut fichu that revealed her breasts deeply down, tautened as they entered and remained that

way throughout an evening that did not relax much more than she did.

New brightness in upholstery, new piano, covers, andirons, picture frames, rugs, oddments and endments of which there was handsome display, lay over an environment that had also once been made newly resplendent by the ascending fury of Mamie Baldwin on her way to madness. For years, as her daughters grew up and out of it, this home had stood, a tarnished mausoleum to the waitress from Silver City who had shot like a meteor through a decade of spending millions, and then, just as suddenly, had hurtled back into the limbo in which she had died.

Casting out evidences of her pathetic predecessor, Leonore was renovating an environment, just as she was renovating Baldwin who had lived through the years in it, hidebound to an idea that his duty was to the living dead, instead of to the living living.

As Kitty reiterated, you had to take off your hat, your ulster and your galoshes to Leonore who had walked in where she herself had hesitated and lost. Respect for a worthy victor lurked in Kitty, and high resolve never again to be caught in the ignominy known as napping.

The renovation of John Baldwin was well advanced. Noticeably thinner, carefully dieted down by Leonore, sweets and starches subtly omitted, and three whisky-sodas a day his pledge, he had already undergone important and rejuvenating changes.

"Your father looks as if he might be his own son," remarked the Charlottenburg, *sotto voce*, as Baldwin, newly straight-fronted, entered the room.

It gave Sierra a little catch inside her. Leonore, a frill of a woman, had accomplished this. Torn him out of the tomb of himself, as she, his daughter, had never succeeded in doing. The implication hung as conspicuously in her mind as the new crystal chandelier dangled into the scene it brightened.

And yet it was to this same frill of a woman she owed her emancipation from this home which had entombed her youth.

As always, her father, who had few enough social graces, was nevertheless the epitome of graciousness to these thoroughly ununderstandable, but somehow likable, friends of Sierra's. "Prospectors under their skin," were these two smart-minded gals

with whom his daughter, who should have been a son, had joined up.

He had never ceased to think of Sierra as the child who should have been a son. With Florence, curving, deep-fleshed, soprano femaleness had immediately asserted itself in the heavy blob of a baby which had sucked with such pulling female lips at Mamie's heavy breasts. He had dreamed of her, too, as a boy, but curls and curves and falsetto had quickly erased all that. Sierra, however, persisted in reminding him that she should have been a son. The very lankiness and lengthiness of her! Her imperviousness to the things that made women bothersome. Her strange stoicisms. When she was only seven, the setting of a broken shoulder bone had not wrung a grimace from her.

Sierra, who had a stride twice too long for a woman, who wore her clothes with a square kind of unfemininity, smoked in an era when it was news, should have been the son her father desired her to be.

Although he did not always face it, Baldwin was earnestly and deeply relieved that in these two gusty women of a species he could not define, this daughter who should have been a son, had found compatibility. A son, or a nun. Sometimes, with complete bewilderment, he wondered which.

Sophisticated and even clinical explanation sometimes hovered behind Leonore's cautious reserve in such discussions as she ventured with Baldwin concerning his daughter.

It seemed to Baldwin that, in a sense, he had also married Sierra off. Not in the sure, secure sense that he had his second daughter Florence, who, with her husband, was now home-building in Wellington, New Zealand. But this arrangement with Sierra's two friends, Mullane and Charlottenburg, was next best. Perhaps, under the circumstances, the very best. Darned strange proposition, his girl Sierra.

This sense of feathering his daughter's new nest not only impelled him to direct investments for the Charlottenburg and Kitty, but, when they did not show up profits, he secretly contributed the equivalent.

Darned smart women, if you asked John Baldwin. Not his choice perhaps. New women were one too much for him. God knew there wasn't any of the Charlottenburg or the Mullane gal



in Leonore, God be praised. But regarding them around his table, Baldwin kept insisting, indeed protesting, to himself: Darned smart women. Mighty darned smart women.

"Father," observed Sierra, "you look elegant in a black tie. Leonore has trained you down to wearing one with distinction."

"I wear this one with dissension."

"Your father and a black tie, Sierra, to say nothing of a white one," remarked Leonore in her throaty voice, "are two solid, uncongenial bodies meeting with impact."

"Most American men in white ties are like dogs on leashes," said the Charlottenburg.

"Oliver is one of the few men I know who wears a white tie as if he were not to be hung in it," said the new Mrs. Baldwin.

"I wasn't referring to lap dogs," said the Charlottenburg, in one of her *sotto voce* asides, which Kitty called whispers into hell.

Oliver himself entered then, and offhand did not seem to warrant the opprobrium.

In a period of the sideburn, small peninsulas of blond hair emphasized the flat pale cheeks. Slender, with effete hands and dandified bearing, he suggested a Frenchman of the boulevards rather than a twenty-eight-year-old Hoosier who had been born in Marion, Indiana, and educated within a stone's throw of his father's safe works. As a matter of fact, he had never been out of Marion, until his long-widowed father, on a first trip to Europe, had met Leonore Brampton on shipboard, married her by way of the ship's captain, and begun, along with his ambitious wife and young son, the new and roving life.

Summers along the Italian and French Rivas, nomadic winters in the various capitals of Europe, with a stepmother who, long before she realized it herself, was doting on his adolescent beauty, had produced this Oliver Plow who had retained little of his native quality, except indolence of body and mind and a certain parrot-like flatness of voice that was as characteristic of Marion, Indiana, as his spats and cut-of-coat were not.

If, according to rumor, Leonore was in love with her stepson, she was in love with what she herself had created. The languid young man who, long since accustomed to the knowledge that women had eyes for him, walked across the new rugs of his

stepmother's new drawing room, created within at least three of the four women who watched him approach, something more than just man-entering-a-room reflexes.

"Sierra," said Leonore, with the flowing ease of manner that made her charming and kept her pretty even as she faded, "you are now in the act of meeting your stepmother's stepson, which I suppose makes him your thingamabob. Oliver, this is Sierra, this is Miss Kitty Mullane, and I believe you and Miss Ames already know one another."

"I watched the back of your neck, young man, as it grew higher and higher above the back of your stepmother's pew, in the days when we both used to attend the Church of the Precious Blood, sampling Catholicism, which will get me yet."

"Those were the days when my stepmother was trying to turn Catholic and take everything in her path along with her, including me."

"I have all the makings of one," replied Leonore, "but it's just as well I didn't turn, since something else happened to salvage my soul, didn't it, Pappy?" she inquired, fastening her sweetish glance upon her husband who leaned over to place his short square hand with its hairy wrist on top of hers.

"And with you, I didn't turn either," replied Oliver, seating himself and crossing his legs in a manner characteristic of the long and lank of limb, one foot hooked about the ankle of the other.

"Perhaps I could have led you, Oliver. They must have coveted you as a choir boy every time you entered the Church of the Precious Blood with me. I should have helped you to find the Catholic God. But that was the trouble. There are three of them. At least, even though Father Spegler worked so as to make me understand, that's how it continued to seem to me. And much as I wanted to turn, three were more than I could manage."

"I'm no good at turning," said Oliver. "It's all that saves me from feeling completely the worm. They do turn, it seems."

"You turn a pretty phrase, sir," said Kitty, making her smallest *moue*.

"Or head," dryly amended the Charlottenburg.

"It would take a better man than I to turn your head, Miss Ames."

"Go along, you. Don't waste your drawing-room patter on a spinster about to be seriously overweight. Try the Kitten Mullane. She purrs."

But not necessarily did the Kitten purr for a young man with no visible prospects other than by the dubious way of a step-mother who, to be sure, was married to a man who was in a position to provide plentifully for the fellow Oliver. That is, provided the situation did not begin to dawn upon him. But you needed only to regard John Baldwin and his wife's stepson, to realize how little there was to hope for in the way of future compatibilities between them.

The older man had the habit of observing Oliver Plow as if he had never seen him before; as if sight of him awoke a wry distaste which pulled at his lips.

Presentable enough, yes, this Oliver Plow. Shaking hands with him was something of an experience, at least down the average female spine. Discounting him with her mind, again and again, Kitty's eyes sought him out, her memory already reliving that sensation down and up her spine as his handshake had closed over hers. Drawing down her eyelids and her skirts, she curled her feet about the chair rung, a charming, simultaneous pair of movements that were not lost upon Oliver.

A sudden sense of futility began to descend upon Sierra. Most of her adult life she had been addicted to the mental gesture of trying to brush aside these recurring swoops of her spirit.

This was one of those social moments of innocuous chatter and meaningless march of circumstance which, ever since she could remember, had periodically saddled her with a sense of futility.

Everything, she had learned to tell herself, is important, or nothing is important.

And yet, when all was said and done, what possible meaning could vacuous hours such as these carry over with them? Six people in a drawing room pattering because the position of a painting or the coloring of a rug had been changed. Six people in a drawing room, four of them women, their nap a little higher because Oliver Plow, who did not measure up to the stature of any one there, was present. The Charlottenburg, crackling like flame along the dry deadwood of this hour. Kitty's meaningful,

yet so meaningless, gestures of eyelid and skirt. Leonore seeming to incline toward Oliver as a reed under water bends to the tide.

Even John Baldwin, exempt at least from all these doings among the women, sat victimized in the midst of the vacuousness. He who had struggled with his hands that still bore calluses and had come down through the years to the tune of big adventure!

What, viewed from the grim vantage of his bier, was going to make the life of John Baldwin anything more than a poor signature written in sand? Certainly not this new wife in blue lace to match her eyes that were fastened on Oliver Plow. Certainly not what his money had brought him, and, God forgive, what his daughters had brought him. Wherein, from the vantage of the bier, would lie the justification of this life—of the lives in this room—of the lives in or out of any room. What was this caring and desiring! This rising of the flesh of at least three out of the four women when the pallid young man named Oliver Plow walked into the room.

Somewhere, imbedded in all this mental and spiritual confusion which raged its gale within her, must reside the meaning of God.

The meaning of God! Her father, sitting there in the midst of a life that had contained a wife who died in her strait jacket, in the midst of a life dreary with frustration and tarnished success, would lie in that bier of his, illuminated with the meaning of God, just as he sat there now, pitiful in his tiredness, his desire to be happy, his private and hurting defeats, yet full of the meaning of God.

The meaning of God! There were times when it came through so clearly, abiding with her, and then again, fugitive, deserting and leaving her in the darkness of moments she dreaded. The eyes of a slum child could light her taper, or a feeling of sudden unity descend upon her when the close, shoving bodies in a subway caused her flesh to feel the radiance of human vitality and human breathing and of faces eager for whatever the next destination might yield.

You had to hold on like grim death to the meaning of God. It could irradiate a slum day and make ministering to tenement children with running noses, to manhandled slum women with hurting ovaries, to sick, poverty-ridden victims, appear to be

God's dirty work to be done in the spirit of his mercy. It could irradiate, or it could flicker and all but go out, leaving cold ashes to clog the heart.

A child made happy with a bauble, diapers washed for a tired mother with bearing-down pains, a basket of provisions carried to an empty larder, could irradiate the heart or leave it clogged with the ashes of futility. There would always be too many children without baubles and with running noses, too many lovely expectant girls to peter out into women with bearing-down pains, too many diapers to wash.

You had to hold on to the meaning of God. You had to hold on to it here, in this drawing room, listening to the patter of the desiring women and regarding the plaintive wish-to-be-happy which was stamped on the face of John Baldwin who was facing the tag end of life.

Tenderness and pity for him, seated there in the midst of his strange unnourishing plenty, smote her. He had found his ore, but his rewards had been largely in the form of gold bricks.

Was Leonore, seated opposite him at this table, his latest one of these bricks?

Dinner was better prepared than in the days when she and her father, and sporadically Florence, had huddled at one end of this vast table. A woman to whom the gracious things mattered had bothered over finger bowls with pansies floating, bead fringe on candle shades, and, what smote Sierra most, hurting her until she could feel tears, was the fact that Leonore had replaced her father's horrific oak dining-room chair with one that contained him to perfection. That old thrust-forward attitude, so characteristic of him at table, was gone. She realized, now, it had been due to the discomfort of the old oak chair and the poking of its carved cherubs into his shoulder blades. To think that in all the years of caring for him, this lightening adjustment had not occurred to her!

Small wonder she had not seen her father's face as eased as this since the ridiculous days she could recall as a child, when Mamie Baldwin had graced this same table, resplendent in an ex-waitress's exuberant choice of satins and jewels that were to make the town ring with side-splitting laughter.

Mamie Baldwin, in those days when her hilarious illiteracies

were being so widely quoted and misquoted, had been just as personable to John Baldwin as was this urbane Leonore.

Basking in the dual glory of the husband who finally had endowed her with security, and the stepson who meant even more than security, Leonore sat slenderly at the head of her table, tingling to her finger tips, because beneath the table Oliver's knee lay negligently against hers.

By contrast to Sierra and her strange companions, she could feel herself revel a little in her own silkiness. Sierra and her kind were the women who had missed. They were the women, and smart women they were too, who had run into what every woman learns to dread with her first adolescent pangs of impending maturity. Here were three women who had missed those centrifugal compensations that make the female world go around. Whatever furtive compensations, if any, they had found in sex, they had not known its open-and-above-board securities. No man came home to them, lay with them, begot with them. Here were three women in a busy design of living that had no bright thread through its center. The thread of the meaning of life, of being a female, of being a possessor, a sitter at the head of a man's table, a wearer of the honorary degree of wife-and-motherhood.

These three women, for a complexity of reasons, many of them strange and turgid if you asked Leonore, had missed! They were not even in the eligible spinster category, because, having missed, they had been building up a wall of smartness and expertness, which men seldom bothered to scale. Or was it the other way around? Had their very smartness shunted them high, dry and husbandless? Leonore, who slept with an aging husband and yearned for young Oliver, roved with her eyes among these three women, so alien to her, so almost sinister.

That amazing female Buddha of a Charlotte Ames, whose life had somehow jumped the track of her good social and financial family history, landing her in these strange meadows of unassorted females. Ugh! if you asked Leonore.

They could have it and all that their knocking about together implied. Implied was the word for it, because somehow, whenever and wherever their trilogy of names was mentioned, something as mannered as the lifting of an eyebrow happened to the

invariable ensuing silence. Why? Inside herself, Leonore thought she knew.

So Leonore, with her knee against Oliver's, felt normal and flattered by her incompatibilities with these women.

They could have their various excitements of trying to sell their fantastic assortment of fake merchandise. Not that you could ever be sure just what it was that Kitty or the Charlottenburg dealt in, Broadway musical comedies, hand-wrought jewelry, young poets, antiques, Javanese scarves and dancers, rainbow sugar crystals, or the novelty which, at the moment, Charlottenburg was exploiting: an Indian fakir who was turning Paris upside down with his rope trick.

As for Sierra. It did not exactly behoove Leonore to look the gift horse in the mouth, and her departure from this house in Murray Hill had been gift. Gift in every sense of the word. Gift of John, unhampered by the circumstance of his daughter in the house. Gift of the freedom of that house. Gift of certain freedoms that made the entire situation tenable.

Oliver, pressing her knee, knew the importance of those certain freedoms; they had been proed and conned between them all during the arrangement of this marriage.

In a way, without knowing it, Sierra, by her offer of quick evacuation, had made things possible for Leonore and Oliver.

No, it did not behoove Leonore to dwell with anything except tolerance and thanksgiving upon the design of Sierra's life. But just the same, what in heaven's name was to be accomplished by Sierra thus allying herself with two such debatable birds as the Charlottenburg and Kitty Mullane—well, in a changing world, you had to expect women to change with it, but—well—there were limits!

"You amazing three creatures, what are you up to these days?" she asked over roast chicken, panned to Oliver's taste.

"At present," replied the Charlottenburg, running a bone jew's-harpwise across her teeth, "I am up to prevailing upon your husband to tip me off on what to buy in the form of Wall Street provender known as stocks. I need handsome-profit from somewhere to enable me to import a tan young man known as 'Fey,' who is setting Paris by the ear, performing a state of mind known as the rope trick."

"Charlottenburg, Inc. presents Fey of Delphi," amended Kitty. "Fey at this moment is probably pulling ropes out of Montmartre ether and doesn't know that such a person as the Charlottenburg exists. His destiny, however, hinges on what happens at this table tonight and in Wall Street tomorrow."

"What is good, Father, in elegantly engraved stocks and bonds?" inquired Sierra.

You could tell by the characteristic turtle-like fashion in which Baldwin darted his head about in his collar, that he had the feeling that the women were at him.

"Nothing is good for a bull in a bear market."

"But, Baldwin, this delicate mauve kitten and myself have accumulated between us, what with star sapphires, bad plays, illustrated toilet paper, pink sugar and the like, the sturdy sum of five thousand dollars."

"And fifty—Charlottenburg ——"

"Which we must double!"

"You business men talk all that out in the alcove," interposed Leonore, pushing back her chair and drawing Oliver with her eyes into her intention to drift apart with him from the group.

The subject carried over with Baldwin as they crossed the hall to the small overcrowded repository of Mamie Baldwin's one-time mania for small and useless objects.

Five thousand and fifty dollars, woman earnings! Something in his make-up, the same something which had countenanced with a certain amount of admiration the caperings of Mamie Trehane, smiled out in Baldwin's eyes as he seated himself.

"A good head on a good woman is a combination hard to find and hard to beat."

"Three good heads on three good women beat it."

The Mullane persiflage fell by the wayside of Baldwin's attention.

"Come, come, Baldwin, you're known for being quick on the uptake."

"I've been supporting a fellow named Joe Quirk and his family out in Pueblo for thirty-four years, Miss Ames, because I was quick on the uptake and won his silver-mine stake over a show-down that took exactly two minutes to play. Those were the



days when silver mines and a fellow's destiny could move across a barroom table."

"Your Joe," exclaimed the Charlottenburg, "had my idea of living dangerously. What this half-dead world needs is alive living, said by one who intends to live that way."

"You clever new women," said Leonore, glancing down her fine nose, "aren't afraid, are you! I guess that's what makes you fascinating." What she might have been saying, with the glance down her nose, was: I guess that's what makes you three strange birds without boughs.

"Hold it," cried Kitty, leaning over to lay her mauve paw on Leonore's pale one, "I suddenly know that I want to make you a necklace of scarabs! I've never worked in scarabs. I would mount two center ones on a slant to match the tilt of your eyes. My purple paws itch to get at it."

Leonore's eyes, with the flecks of scarab green in them, fastened themselves upon her stepson.

"Something scarab in me, never before suspected, lifts its head. Speaking of scarabs, come along, Oliver, to the library. I'll show you that jade elephant Laura sent me from Cairo."

Seated in the kind of pause the two of them invariably created when they left a room together, the Charlottenburg slapped the palm of her hand noisily across her thigh.

"What say, Baldwin! I'll cut you cards for the roll in my stocking! Or better still, for the five thousand simoleons Kitty and I have salted down together. All right, Kits?"

The blue eyes of Miss Mullane darkened without budging in their orbits. "Yes."

"Everything or nothing with us, Baldwin. Humor a fat old maid, and cut cards with her. I'll make you a bet on the side, too, that I fleece the pants off you."

Now whacking *his* thigh, so that the flesh rang through, Baldwin reached for a deck from the table drawer beside him, handling the cards with the loose easy fingers of one accustomed to their shape and feel and slide.

The lamps in the nutshell of a room, which Leonore had seen fit to leave mockingly in the horrific period of her predecessor, shone through eyeleted brass shades. It was an orgy of a room, so reminiscent of the woman who had outfitted it, from inlaid

taborets, to rug-smothered davenport, to Turkish water pipes, that you could smell the musk that had once emanated from behind the ear lobes of Mamie Baldwin as she had moved to the sound of her own bangles through this forestry of her flamboyance.

Cruelly, Leonore had left this crimson folly of a room untouched. Here, hemmed in by pillows, palms, and taborets, Baldwin's baize-covered card table stood beneath its Turkish lamp, like a fever patient's dream of oasis.

"Don't you girls go getting my old gaming blood up."

"I'll play you a showdown for your gold tooth," boomed the Charlottenburg, her knees, as she sat, immensely apart.

He threw back his head and guffawed. Here was a woman!

"Haven't one in my mouth, fat girl!"

"Well then, for the gold tooth you're going to have if your wife persists in soft delicious grub that slithers down past the ivory gates without giving the grinders a chance to work."

"Come, come," said Kitty, sliding her flat body into the chair alongside Baldwin, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Play your stakes fast and hard and may the best man win."

"Don't be an idiot, John," called Leonore through the library door. "Those bold, bad-land girls will fleece you out of rope-trick money before you can say Jack Robinson."

Her voice, big, metallic and angrier than she knew, was her first strategic error of the evening, because, at its challenge, zest came out in the face of her husband as he squared his heavy frontage before the card table.

"They will, will they?" he called back. "I'll fleece the pants off them!"

"You're crazy, John. Those girls are gambling on the age of chivalry. You haven't a chance."

Sierra leaned back in her chair to peer through the doorway toward the library, fastening quiet, amused eyes in the direction of her stepmother and Oliver.

"Nonsense, Leonore. Father is free, white and over twenty-one."

"I thought so when I married him. All I'm sure of now are his complexion and age."

"Age of chivalry, my hind foot. I'm playing your husband eye to eye—tooth for tooth."

"Never mind, Leonore," called Sierra, "I'll stand by, and see that the bad-land girls don't strip Father down to the linen and flat snver."

For years afterward, Kitty was to describe this scene of cutting of the cards, as it took place between Charlotte Ames and John Baldwin, that evening after the dinner that had introduced Oliver Plow as a residing member of the house in Murray Hill, and during which he, who was to influence that house so profoundly, had not uttered thirty words.

For years, Kitty was to describe John Baldwin of Silvertown, trekker, cowpuncher, miner, sitting there in that nightmare of a cozy corner, his old instincts raised and alive. This was no longer the man to make good (as they suspected he had in the past) any losses of the occasion. This was the old gambling John Baldwin, out to beat the pants off an adversary.

Charlottenburg had stumbled into a mare's nest! Mindful of it, her large face, oyster-color and oyster-soft, hung in chins above her bosom, her tiny well-cushioned hands flat on the green felt.

In the tenseness of these pads of hands crouched her only visible emotion. They were whitish at the finger tips, but jammed with blood above them.

"Understand, Baldwin? We're cutting for five thousand dollars! High wins."

"Five thousand and fifty is what your mate here said."

"Well, if you're going to be chicken feed about it, make it five thousand and fifty dollars and seventy-two cents! The exact amount of our bank balance, isn't it, Kit?"

"Oh, Charlottenburg—those damned little odd numbers do such things to our bank balance!"

"Hush! What I intend to do is double our balance, not lose it."

"Have a cigar for bad luck, Charlottenburg," said Baldwin, passing her a box of the strong cheap cheroots he favored. Contrary to her custom of smoking only her own small brand, she took one, pulling off its end with her teeth, lighting it with her eyes fixed on the green baize cloth with the deck of cards in its center.

"Let's toss a coin to see who will make the big cut for five thousand and fifty dollars and ——"

"—and don't forget ittsie Kitty's seventy-two cents."

"Throttle that baby talk for me, will you, Sierra? I'm engaged in contemplating the cutting of that small neat deck of cards for the sum of all our worldly goods and my side partner starts to lisp as if she were lined in pink plush. Got a quarter, Baldwin? Give me. What say? Heads, I cut first."

"Shoot."

Bang went the coin on the table top.

"Tails. I cut first," said Baldwin, dryly, reaching for the deck.

"Just the same, I'll spit on my palms," chortled the Charlottenburg, suiting action to word.

They hung, Baldwin, the Charlottenburg, Kitty, Sierra, silently over the table in the fantastic overstuffed den of Mamie Trehane's, their breathing and the lighted dome of chandelier pouring down.

"Ready, girls," said Baldwin, persiflage gone from his voice and an old and almost extant expression awake in his eyes.

"Ready!"

He lifted one third of the unshuffled deck lightly, with the delicacy of a woman, slanting the revealed card just enough to reveal.

"Queen of hearts. Good God, you're making it easy for your fat friend, aren't you!" The tiny padded hand of the Charlottenburg shot out immediately then, scrambling up the cards, shuffling and spanking them down again. "This time I won't spit," she said, and lifted a section of the deck, elegantly and slowly as Baldwin had.

"Ace of diamonds! Charlottenburg, you've topped him!"

"Well, I'll be goddamned. Kits, we're in the money. We do seem to have licked the pants off our host. How much is twice five thousand and fifty dollars and seventy-two cents?"

"I don't know in figures, darling, but it adds up to heaven."

"To me it adds up to—er—a—ten thousand one hundred and one dollars and forty-four cents. Right, host?"

"Right."

"Your word is as good as your I.O.U., Baldwin, but I much prefer your immediate check to either."

He slapped himself against the chest and began to laugh uproariously as he reached for his fountain pen.

"Godalmighty, you new women," he snorked, "I wouldn't marry one of you for a gift, but by God, you're good company."

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## CHAPTER XI

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WHAT Sierra found perturbing about the Europiums was not that the Charlottenburg was in the throes of promotion, but the outward manifestations of her new enthusiasm were on the ridiculous side.

The daily procession of the members of the Europium troupe, which Charlottenburg was assembling on a shoestring of an idea and investment, as they arrived at Twenty-one East with their draperies, which they wore hanging beneath their topcoats, was what Kitty called murderously funny. Not, she would hasten to explain, because the Europiums were more than mildly absurd, but because of the incredulous what-have-we-here expression they elicited from the passers-by.

"That's the expression," explained the Charlottenburg, "which I am counting on to bring paying customers to the box office."

You stumbled over Europiums in the hallways of Twenty-one East, seated in clumps on the stairs, prowling for bathrooms, practicing their stylized postures before all possible mirrors.

Dared you so much as drop into the Charlottenburg's quarters a moment before dinner, and a drapery was sure to stir because a Europium was reclining behind it on a window seat, or attempt to settle yourself on a comfortable cushion and a nudge from the Charlottenburg would indicate that a Europium was squatting on the floor beside the divan.

The Charlottenburg's part of the Mullane-Charlottenburg five-thousand-dollar coup had gone into Europium, the Indian rope trickster project having dissolved into the Indian who arrived but without the trick.

The Europiums had moved into the Charlottenburg orbit through circuitous procedures starting with a Greek candy dealer on Third Avenue, where she purchased the jelly beans she habitually kept in a desk drawer against a short nervous cough; on through to his sister-in-law, who had married a Brooklyn dentist; on in turn to her sister-in-law, who had once been a stewardess on a cruise ship to the Grecian Isles; on through to his cousin, a Russian-Jewish ex-ballet director of Moscow, who had fled pogrom and subsequently set up in New York what he was pleased to term his studio for "Europiums."

"The name itself is an investment I'll gamble on! 'Charlottenburg, Inc. presents the Europiums.'"

"But what does it mean, Charlottenburg?"

"So far as I can determine, it doesn't mean a goddamn thing except to a metallurgist who dabbles in metallic elements of the rare earth group. That's part of its value. It's one of those plush-horse words. No matter what it means, it sounds continental, sophisticated, cultural. Not one in a thousand will know that it doesn't mean one goddamned thing! Have you seen the Europiums? Obligation to see them will go with the elegant word. I'm gambling on box office to bear me out."

"She'll probably put them over the way she did her Morning Matinees," remarked Sierra to Kitty as they stood in the lower hall in wraps, the evening of the "first American" appearance of the Europiums.

"I could wish," complained Kitty, "that the Charlottenburg had not seen fit to mount us in an upper left box, especially since that adenoidal young man with the large panther face, who has been drinking the Charlottenburg out of house and Scotch for the last weeks, uses it as his springboard when he leaps to the stage to come to grips with the Tootsie whose hips the Charlottenburg has been having massaged."

Her black broadcloth coachman's coat with its square-shouldered cape boxing her in warmly, Sierra flung open the front door, letting in a waiting gust of clear December air.

"Come along, a walk will give us courage to face our Europiums."

"Good God, must we walk, Sierra! We can afford our last hansom before Europiums eat us out of house and home. Why, may I ask, didn't you have your father's wife call for us in her car?"

"It's only a step, Kitty, to Beethoven Hall. Besides, this December air is like ice water."

"The longest step that these expensive suèdes of mine have ever trod. Isn't your father's wife going to show up?"

"My father's wife rarely shows up at the antics of her husband's daughter."

"Leonore would be the Charlottenburg's idea of ideal audience for Europiums. The gesture of pain in the tummy, quinine in the ears, spasmodic jerkings, and love life among the cretins could be sold to Leonore. Br-r-r! How I loathe fresh air!"

They strode along the narrow, brown-fronted side street, horse and motorcar traffic animating the theater hour.

"There is always the horrible chance, Sierra, that the Charlottenburg is going to overstep."

"Yes, I'm always afraid someone is going to shout, 'But, Mama, he has no clothes on,' the way the youngster did when the king passed naked along the streets, forcing the starving populace to pretend delight in his gorgeous robes."

"Charlottenburg would meet that one. 'Now that you mention it,' she would say, 'I do note that the king has nothing on, but see how beautifully embroidered it is!' The woman has the town by the tail."

"A part of its anatomy which you, too, seem to be successfully twisting, Kit."

"Sierra, do you think that! Do you think your shamelessly materialistic, designing, social-climbing Kitten is mattering a tinker's dam to anybody except herself? I want to twist the tail of this big, bad town, Sierra. I know it seems petty to you, but I want to matter. And the ways in which I want to matter aren't too first-rate!"

"I wouldn't say that, Kits."

"No, you wouldn't because you couldn't. There isn't a nick or a flaw in your first-rateness. But I want to matter, willy-nilly,

Sierra. I want to matter to half a dozen men in this town who don't even know I exist. I want to matter to an appendage to the apron string of your father's wife known as Oliver Plow."

"I ——"

"Let's not go into that!"

"But ——"

"I not only want to matter to everything and everybody that matters to me, but to all sorts of things and people that don't matter. I want to make money. I want to marry rich. Very rich. I want to eat my cake and have my cake. I want you and the Charlottenburg, and I want a rich husband. I want to matter to half a dozen men who haven't even given me a second thought and to another half dozen who don't even know I exist. I say it again. I want to matter to that appendage to the aprong string of your father's wife known as Oliver Plow! He's as worthless as Confederate money and he could have me tomorrow. I mean tonight."

The long measured stride of Sierra, twice the length of Kitty's, laid itself down in measured rhythm, giving slow grace to the tall figure beneath the coachman's dolman.

"Kitty, you can really be—pretty raw! Not to say disgusting."

"Disgusting but honest. For all I know, oh, High Sierra, up there with your head in the clouds, dreaming recreation piers for youngsters who will probably grow up into enemies of society, and social clubs for female lonely hearts who would steal your lover if you had one—for all I know, up there where you reside, oh, High Sierra, you too, even as Leonore and I, and God knows how many other addicts for worthless males, are coveting our Oliver. Are you?"

With a short laugh Sierra laid her arm along Kitty's shoulder, drawing her closer as they hurried.

"I can't understand every man you meet not falling in love with you, Kits. As a matter of fact, I think most of them do. It's your reputation for smartness does the damage. To most men, a den of forty thieves is a kindergarten compared to the perils of a den of women like you and the Charlottenburg. As for me ——"

"As for you! You're above giving a damn. Cats don't look too long at queens like you, unless the queen winks. I'm the type that winks and winks, but see where it doesn't get me."



"I'm interested in where just being you will get you, Kitty, which is far."

"Look! That crowd going into Beethoven Hall is Charlottenburg's. She should have taken Carnegie Hall. Look, will you! Packing them in. She's done it again!"

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## CHAPTER XII

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CHARLOTTENBURG, INC. PRESENTS  
NORTH AMERICAN EUROPIUM DANCERS  
NOVELTY PAR EXCELLENCE

Drawn from every land, they introduce the newest and last word in creative movement. They are something new under the sun.

Improvising as they move through an unrehearsed series of Europium plastics, which they execute within no formal bounds except those imposed by musical accompaniment, they weave the impromptu pattern of their story.

CHARLOTTENBURG, INC. takes pride in introducing to America for the first time this group of creative artists who speak their lively language in a new form of art.

Audiences will please note that they are requested to refrain from applause until completion of program. The programs are printed on silk to avoid rustling sounds that may prove distracting to the artists.

FROM the shadowy rear of their box, its first chair a spring-board for a male Europium to take a spectacular leap to the stage, Kitty, placing her cautious lips directly against Sierra's ear, kept up running whispers of comment.

"She's done it again! They are taking this addled lunacy like solemn owls instead of hooting with laughter. Look down there in the third row at Downing Ross. He is still awake, by Jove.

It's long past his sleep-through-it hour. That means the *Times* review is clinched."

"Shh-h-h, Kitty."

"Remember that third chorine from the left? Remember? She's the one Charlottenburg has been feeding oatmeal and jelly omelettes in order to put a little flesh on that awful spine line down her back. But it must have gone to her waistline instead. Look at those dryads doing didos to Beethoven! What have we here? Really, us vestal virgin girls are being barbecued."

"I think it's rather beautiful. The tongue in the cheek of the Charlottenburg doesn't show through."

"Yes, I suppose nerve alone couldn't assemble this plush audience to see these japes perform nonsense under a name that doesn't make sense. Nerve and impudence aren't enough. Something real has to lurk somewhere. That's the Charlottenburg genius! She's real somewhere, God knows where!"

"There come all those yellow scarves that have been floating around the house all month, Kitty. What on earth are they doing! Rather lovely, whatever it is, all those whirling yellow tops. They are tops, aren't they, spinning in odd sizes and odd yellows."

"Yes, either tops or turnips, but what about those assorted sizes in chiffon overalls, who appear to be throwing pitchforks of gilt fertilizer over the back fence. Perhaps it's the Greek way of life as practiced in the Bronx."

"Most of them are foreign, at least so says the Charlottenburg."

"As foreign as ham and eggs. With the exception of Chiano of the garlic breath, there isn't one of the fifty who comes from points farther than Brooklyn. And Chiano had been running his Marionette Theatre down in Mulberry Street for at least ten years before she found him."

"She's smart, Kitty."

"Smart as hell."

"I'd been passing Chiano's cellar marionettes days on end as I went to the settlement house, and it never even occurred to me to explore."

"That's her kind of smartness. Not yours. Besides, if this thing goes off like a wet firecracker, we will live to rue the day the Charlottenburg stumbled by Chiano's cellar on her way to visit you at the settlement house."

"I don't think we're going to rue it. Look!"

Without interlude of curtain, a sharp electric blue haze flooded bare stage and auditorium alike, light seeming to pour in a colored dust, into which, against a blue-out of bodies and features, a hundred pale hands wove their separate interpretation of a Bach fugue.

It remained a quiet audience of straight faces and receptivity. A snigger, a repressed bit of laughter, or that light wave of movement that can rise off even the most decorous assemblage, would have been match to tinder.

Through eleven minutes of pale gyration, during which the bodies of blue-clad figures swam gradually into view, the posturing hands and torsos slowly took on movement, drifting to what might be called their climax of digital maneuvers. Crowding the horizon of backdrop with their flutterings and sinuosities, gradually, with no relationship to the fugue which played faintly after them, they drifted off, leaving vagueness that you could almost see and touch.

Incertitude hung for a moment, an indecisive audience still waiting for the drop of the leaf that was to determine its reaction. Apparently the Charlottenburg had reckoned with the importance of the fall of that leaf. Without musical accompaniment, it fluttered slowly on stage in the form of a sylph of a slip of a girl, her drapes, in their high colorings and jagged outlines, suggesting a maple leaf in autumn.

Silently and with immense curves of movement and color, more leaves began to fall—and fall—crowding the stage with dancers whose bodies had neither identity nor form. Faster and faster, the falling of the leaves. Faster and faster! Faster and faster! Leaves in autumn. Death in autumn. Rainbows in autumn! Spin of death in autumn.

And suddenly, fast as the fall of the leaves themselves—applause—applause against every stricture—applause——

Through two hours, burst after burst of it, on through to the last number which again took place in the spangled motes of the blue dust.

In what Kitty described as its "nauseatingly arty manner," the silk programs called this last opus "Tibetan Curve."

Actually, through the blue of the dust, a march of pilgrims succeeded in giving amazingly realistic effect, by way of body

eloquence, of the climbing agonies of a band of visitants up toward some Tibetan monastery. Bone-tired, parched, lame and halt, blind and footsore, they pulled upward and toward—upward and toward, drifting around the last exhausting curve and leaving the stage, for its finale, bathed in the silent, the bright blue dust. Thus the evening, petering out as casually as it had begun. Blue dust to blue dust.

Without giving the audience a split second to reach a conclusion that must ultimately fall on the sublime or ridiculous side of a split hair, the Charlottenburg strode to the stage. Sure, abundant, wrapped in electric-blue fog, she took her place behind the doused footlights and without preamble began speaking against the applause that greeted her appearance.

"Customers, the Europiums and I appreciate your appreciation. It has been our conviction that this unorthodox and cerebral form which you have witnessed here tonight is a signal leap ahead. As you Disobedients see, we do not invite your palm-beating, which we feel would shatter the moods these artists have created by way of what is undoubtedly the perfect combination of intellect and emotion, as applied to this new form of the dance.

"Believe it or not, Customers, we are going to do all in our power to prevent the Europiums from becoming a popular success.

"Help us keep our secret until such time as we think wider audiences are ready for the accouchement which will deliver a new muse.

"I want to acknowledge my appreciation to my associate and student of Europium, Mr. Tony Chiano, to my colleagues, Miss Sierra Baldwin, for her warm co-operation, including the financial, and to Miss Kitty Mullane who, ladies and gentlemen, is responsible for the startling original color effects, including this gorgeous fog in which we are now gathered and on which you have feasted your eyes tonight for the first time on any stage.

"Sitting in at this birth of a new art would be a privilege for me if there were not a penny in it, heaven forbid, and with your co-operation, heaven will. (Laughter.)

"And now, boys and girls, good night, and remember, help me keep the Europiums from becoming a premature popular success."

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## CHAPTER XIII

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JUST how Kitty, with one maidservant, managed to keep Twenty-one East the precise little establishment into which fitted with nicety three so diversified, was a feat more complicated than appeared on the smooth surface.

Although she concealed it with a sense of painful private embarrassment from Sierra or the Charlottenburg, she was not above stealing, of a midnight, wrapped in an old negligee which she pinned high above her knees, out into the hallways of the darkened house, polishing at mirrors where a blur might have caught her wary eye during the day, dusting, or window washing, seating herself on the sill, closing the frame down into her lap and polishing away, sometimes in cold that threatened to freeze the water against the pane.

She was sensitive about all this, guarding her intimacy with household machinations even from those for whom she performed them, exercising care to even keep the housemaid in ignorance of these night raids.

If the Charlottenburg suspected that the beautifully fluted ruffles on her bedroom curtains were the work of Kitty, she commented not at all. Neither did Sierra, but for the reason that, unalert to such details, she only sensed in a vague way this feat of a one-servant establishment.

Without benefit of the one maid, who was never kept up for late service, you could count on returning to Twenty-one East, after a play or concert, to find a fastidious array of cold foods, bottled beers, and a chafing dish already filled and awaiting no more than a match to the spirit lamp.

Usually these repasts were spread on the card table before the Charlottenburg's open fire, or on those rare occasions when Kitty or Sierra came in alone, laid out at one end of the dining room.

Even the Charlottenburg, who, as she fattened, became avowedly the gourmet, remained outside the pleasant mystery of how Kitty, on a relatively slender budget, was ultimately to establish a culinary reputation for this household of three women.

If you dined there in that small but cunningly appointed dining room, into which the Charlottenburg seemed to fit like the proverbial bull into the miniature elegancies of a china bazaar, you were sure to encounter a new curried dish; rum-baked Virginia ham, culled from an old southern recipe book; toasted orange slices; apples baked with peppermint sticks; this or that strange and delicious-to-the-palate adventure in gastronomics. Where Kitty obtained her Camembert cheeses, ripe and viscous to a degree invariably remarked at table, was her own laconic affair, until eventually she was to drift into silent partnership with the small Desbrosses Street importer she had discovered for herself while browsing in lower New York's zones of foreign provender and exotic spices.

There were creamy Camembert, cold cuts, a whole smoked turkey imploring with its legs, to be carved, a many-colored salad of fresh vegetables, hazelnut tort (baked by Kitty the preceding midnight), a chafing dish waiting to be lighted, coffee likewise ready to percolate over its spirit lamp, whisky and soda, bottled beer, cognacs, on the table before Charlottenburg's fireplace this evening following the Europiums.

A cannel fire, pinkened by the patented coloration process, played across the faces of the small group that had gathered at Twenty-one East.

It included the Charlottenburg herself, squatted wide on her chair that faced the coffee urn. Sierra, motionless, even to her eyes in their orbits, with her long legs stretched as if they were

carved beneath the drape of her skirt. Kitty, pouring, passing, animate with diminutive activities.

There was a dark, narrow girl, Semitic in the Spanish way, who held her profile, outlined in its slick curtains of black hair, sharp and high. Her name appeared on the Europium program as "Sandra Cassandra," but the postmen on a route which covered Avenue V, Brooklyn, knew her as Mrs. Ben Galenzer, whose husband's dentist shingle hung outside their small two-family residence. Present also were: Dr. Galenzer himself, stubby, paunched, forty, likewise Brooklyn-born, reared, and accented; Oliver, flat as an eel, and flat on his back, on a couch whose nest of cushions half-obsured him.

"Is poor Ollie too weak to take nourishment in the divine form of a hot English muffin smeared with hot, spiced Mexican cheese?" said Kitty, lifting the pillow beneath his head and moving the aromatic tidbit in the region of the blond hedge of mustache.

He kissed the back of her gloved hand.

"Women like you make bachelorhood a calamity," he said, and dropped it with a sigh.

"A calamity, my dear Ollie, which you hold on to as successfully as most women wish they could hold on to you."

"That, if true, can mean nothing to me, so long as you are not included in the number."

"Which, alas, I am."

The Charlottenburg, rubbing napkin across her gusty lips, pushed back from the table, diving into desk drawer for her ubiquitous knitting bag.

"We will now turn from the gloating complaints of the bachelor to the business of the hour."

Oliver elevated himself slightly to pull at the bit of pale wool over which her needles had already begun to flicker.

"Charlottenburg, why didn't you tell us!"

"Go along! I'm knitting a baby shimmy all right, but it's for my beautiful, dumb, church-mouse niece down in New Orleans, who is about to have a third, by a shoe clerk of a husband who can't even pay for diapers."

"Charlottenburg, must you!"

"At that, she's done more for her country, even if ole Aunt Charlottenburg has to foot the lying-in bills, than any woman in



this room, including mauve paws there, and the beauteous Cassandra as well. Am I right, Doc?"

"Ah, Mess Charlottenburg," said the lovely thing, her manner false and airy, "in my profession, it is sad but true that the best years for dancing are also the best years for making babies."

"I know, my dear," said Charlottenburg dryly over the knitting needles, "and your art will not be denied. But suppose we relax. Your accent is superb and consistent, but we are among friends. Be yourself, Cassie. The man called Plow, over there among the cushions, who has been making a counterfeit noise like a frustrated bachelor, is also one of us, although not so much, you can observe, as my mauve-pawed friend could wish. Relax, Doc. You and Cassie can go native as far back as you like."

"Oh, Miss Charlottenburg, I feel you are undressing me."

"If your husband weren't here, I'd tell you something about that undressing business as it relates to your tonight's performance."

"Don't mind. He is my friend, as well as my se-veerest creetic."

"You're a lovely kid, Cassie, with a nice clean mind and a body technique that is vulgar as hell. Every man in that audience tonight was undressing you with his eyes."

"For God's sake, Charlottenburg——"

"Oh, Kitty, shut up! When a nice clean child waggles her little back side so that she spoils her beautiful little body and doesn't know what it's all about, I'll speak out, if hell freezes over."

The stubby little dentist leaped to his feet, pushing his thick spectacles to the perch of his brow.

"You're so dead right, Miss Ames. I can't get it out of her. She postures like the little tart that she isn't!"

"Oh, Ben, honest to God, if you begin that on me when I'm tired as a dog!"

"If your husband doesn't, I will! Stop vulgarizing yourself! They will like what you've got! It's more of a novelty to find housewife inside those beautiful ribs of yours than it is to find hussy. Be yourself."

"Make her see it that way, Miss Ames!"

"All right. If that's the side they want of me, let me dance in

my kitchen apron. I've got plenty of them, with worn spots across the belly from the kitchen sink."

"You little fool. It's the kitchen apron in you sets you apart from a hundred hussies with good thighs."

"Tell her that, Miss Ames—explain it—she gets sore when it comes from me."

"I've been trying to for three weeks—and tonight she goes berserk on us!"

"They liked me!"

"Only because you couldn't hide the kitchen apron in you! They didn't see any novelty in just one more fancy back side. Any musical show has them by the dozens. You've got something special and sweet and good and fresh in your personality. As fresh as one of your kitchen aprons after you've ironed it. If you've the common sense to let your husband and me highlight the little housewife which you are, instead of the hussy which you aren't, we'll get somewhere."

"Go on, Miss Ames. She won't take it from me. She thinks I'm prejudiced. She thinks I'm an old fogey."

"Don't you believe him, Miss Ames. I try. Only when I get going—I forget—I want to do it one way and I get to doing it another—tonight I—oh, God, I could feel myself going looney in the 'Walking of the Women of Oconomowac,' number. I can be myself up to a point, and then if I get warmed up, I get going—looney—haywire. I'm a flop, that's what I am!"

The chubby dentist leaned forward, encompassing the slender olive-tinted body of his wife with his short and homely arms.

"Bella, you were the center of that stage tonight. But you don't need to care one way or another. You've got an old man doting on you whether this here thing goes through or whether we decide there's more sense to letting molars and cuspids pay the rent. But having enlisted our friend, Miss Ames, here, we naturally want——"

"Come, come. Let's look at this matter realistically. Cassie is a sensible kid. She'll take direction. She doesn't want to go back to Avenue V, Brooklyn, without medals on her. We'll start rehearsing our unrehearsed show all over again tomorrow at eleven. And Cassie will get that nasty little wiggle out of her. And now, where do we go from here, Doc? I didn't see fit to initiate my

two friends here, Miss Mullane and Miss Baldwin, into the fact that the rustling they heard tonight wasn't greenbacks, but only the noises that emanate from a papered house."

"Why didn't you see fit to induct Sierra and me?"

"Success psychology, my lambs. Why set going vibrations of a papered house. All of which places Doc and me, and incidentally you, Kitty mia, and Sierra, in the red for the moment."

The dentist rubbed his perplexed chin.

"A wife and every penny of my savings are my investment in this here project."

"You'll never regret it, Doc," interposed the Charlottenburg. "I believe in Cassie more this minute than ever. I want to handle her, exploit her, and make her the grand lady of Europium. There's money in both."

"My hubby thinks that too, Miss Ames. Don't you, lambie?"

"I wouldn't let my wife go cavorting into this business just because a couple of neighbors started things by admiring her cavortings before the mirror, and because one of them knew somebody who knew somebody who was starting a new idea in dancing."

"You see, Ben knew, when I married him, I had ambitions. Didn't you, Honey?"

"That's right; now tell how I roped and threw you out of the path of your ambitions."

"You didn't, Honey. I'd do it all over again thisaway. But you did promise, now didn't you, Benny, that if the bug ever bit me, I could go back and try my hand, I mean my foot, at ——"

"Well, doggone it, ain't you?"

"Sure I am, Honey. And I'm going to be a good girl and show you how I appreciate it."

"You bet your life you are, Toots," interposed the Charlottenburg, smiling into her clicking needles. "She's a good girl, isn't she, Doc, and you trust her?"

"Good as gold, or I'll break her back."

"Don't worry, Doc, I'd break her back too. There isn't a career on God's earth has got enough pulling power with me to warrant smashing what you and Cassie have out there in that little Flatbush flat of yours."

"I know that, Miss Ames, or I wouldn't have started this whole ——"

"Only don't snoop! You're a good dentist and Cassie's a good kid, but you need what I've got, in order to put this thing you've started, over. If you do it yourselves, you're going to get the hook and get the laugh and one is just about as likely as the other if this thing isn't managed with the master's touch and yours ain't it, Doc. There wasn't but a hair line divided the sublime from the ridiculous tonight. We're still in the hands of tomorrow's critics as to which side of that hair line we're on. If you're the smart little pair of bourgeoisie Brooklynites I take you to be, you're going to place your moist palms in Charlottenburg's, and thank God you've got her to guide you."

Mrs. Galenzer turned her great ovals of eyes upon her husband, her head rolling sidewise on her lovely neck.

"She's right, Benny," she said in her throaty voice. "We'll make an awful mess of something we don't know anything about. You're God's gift to molars, Honey. But that doesn't make you an impresario."

"That's a nonsense you should preserve in alcohol. A dentist has to graduate from dental college, but since when does a business manager have to graduate from business college?"

"But, Honey, you don't understand ——"

"Look here, Doc, for half a dime I'd wipe my hands of the entire business and let you put the noose around your neck. Trouble is, if I do, the pretty neck of your girl gets let in for a noosing, too. If not for that, I wouldn't touch any more Europiums with a ten-foot pole. My share, at best, isn't going to make me rich. Besides, even if it is, I've got to be in love with what I'm doing. I'm not an all-passion-spent worker. I've got to be hot!"

"Really, Charlottenburg ——"

"You know what I mean, Kitty, and stop wiping your face with your paws like a pussy. I'll go to the North Pole, Doc, on a good new hot idea. Your wife is it! But ——"

"Miss Ames means, Benny dear, you're awful smart, but ——"

"But not smart enough to handle my own wife's affairs."

"Now, Honey-Ben, if you say that, I'll just throw the whole

thing over and forget it. The entire Europium shebang isn't worth my Benny's little finger."

"You're damned right it isn't, Cassie. If your husband isn't smart enough to try and run this thing so you can have your cake and eat it too, my advice to you is to put on your little hat, button up your little coat, and go back with him to your little Flatbush flat and have a baby a year, without waiting to earn enough to have 'em right! I'm serious. If it's got to be one or the other, you two Brooklyn babies go back home to Avenue V and hatch your young."

"But, Miss Ames ——"

"Blessings on you, my children. Finish your creamed whatever-it-is Miss Mullane has messed up in the chafing dish, and run home. This old war hoss is tuckered out and wishes you God-speed. If there's anything I can do from the side lines, call on me. A coast-to-coast Europium tour means somebody's got to be wise! And above all, Doc, remember, you've got to make your audiences keep their faces straight. One snigger in the wrong place, and you're sunk. Watch this little number-one bet, your wife. Remember, the more she rehearses her extemporaneousness, the more spontaneous! That applies to them all! Go to it, children!"

Amused, struck with the relentless sureness of the Charlottenburg tactic, Sierra leaned, chin in palm, regarding her stout friend. Her advantage was so easy. It was a combination of the ridiculous and the pathetic to see her easy prey wriggle on the hook she had dropped for them. The Charlottenburg, being her most inimitable self, was at least some compensation for this long session with the Brooklyn dentist and his wife Bella, who, off the stage, became extinguished as if someone had blown out a candle.

A sort of twilight of silence fell on the group, a silence filled with the whirring sound of burning coals. Into it, the horizontal figure of Oliver, lying now with his hands crossed behind his head and his eyes slitted, shifted his long legs and every woman in the room knew which leg, and that his eyes were slitted.

Her gloved hands done with moving among the supper things and quiet now in her lap, the eyes of Kitty were shuttered too, so that you felt her smiling behind them. Firelight moved on

across to the Charlottenburg's great pale oyster of a face, making it pink and babyish behind her cigar smoke.

"Watch your step, Doc. Handle this girl right, and you're in the money. Remember that New York isn't America. As a matter of fact, you've played your greatest hick town tonight. West of Hoboken they're not afraid to stay at home nights, and therefore are not so wild for entertainment. Build your girl up slowly. She's a property. Bless you, my children, and now home and to bed!"

With a sudden gesture, the figure with the shining black hair drawn back from the pallor of her cheeks, slid to her knees, grasping at the Charlottenburg's knitting hands.

"Dear Miss Ames, dear, dear Charlottenburg, darling Charlottenburg, you're not deserting us? You wouldn't! You couldn't!"

The large figure, flickered over with firelight, patted the sleek head lightly.

"There, there. Of course I'm not. If you and the Doc want to run your own affairs, you have my blessing. No hard feelings and I'll cheer you from the side lines. Besides, I may be one hundred per cent wrong about the hard going ahead."

"You're not! You're one hundred per cent right. Ben is acting like a fool and he knows it. Please, dear darling—you're misunderstanding. Don't cast us off."

"Nonsense. You and Doc have been casting me off. Well, that's comfortably within your legal rights. Technically, I hired you for one performance, counting, of course, on the unwritten letter of the kind of law I am accustomed to observe with my clients. It's the only basis on which I can work with people. Guess I'm a goddamned poor business woman."

"Dear Miss Ames, we're that way too, aren't we, Ben? We're not cut-and-dried business. We don't know anything about it. Doc just shoots off his mouth without meaning——"

"You've had your New York presentation. I've had mine. As matters turned out, what with my hell-bentness to make this the success I believe it to be, at any cost, there's damn little in it for me, except the red side of the ledger. You get paid. But that's all right, too. I ate before I clapped eyes on Europiums, and I'll continue to eat long afterwards. *Damn* well, too! You ate before

you clapped eyes on the Charlottenburg, good borsch and stuffed derma at that. Am I right, Doc?"

"Tell her, Bennie, not to cast us out!"

"Just to show you there's no hard feelings, I'll make you a present of my share in the word *Europium*, and in return, you invite me and my friends, Miss Mullane and Miss Baldwin, and Mr. Plow, up to your apartment some night for gefüllte fish. Now you two lovesick kids out of Brooklyn, scamper!"

The startled and agonized face at the knees of the Charlottenburg no longer made any pretense at restraint. The jaw trembled, the *doloroso* eyes ran tears.

"Dearest Charlottenburg, don't cast us off. Don't let her, Ben!"

"Charlottenburg, stop torturing that child!" cried Sierra.

"Beg her, Miss Baldwin!"

"Miss Baldwin doesn't live down on this plane of bicker and dicker. She thinks there are little fairies in the bottom of the tea-cup, and that Brooklyn dentists have wings."

"Oh, my dearest darling Miss Ames, Ben has, when it comes to me! He don't mean anything like what you think he means. It's his way of babying me, as if I didn't have enough sense to get out of the rain ——"

"You mean it's his way of suspecting I haven't enough sense to get out of the rain or keep you out, either."

The husband of the Brooklyn *doloroso* rose to his feet, brushing bits of tobacco and ash from the creases of his trousers, and confronted the Charlottenburg from across the table.

"My wife's right about this, and so are you. I'm a hell of a business guy or I wouldn't be messing things up thisaway. Sure, we've got something that's got to be handled like a new babe. You said a mouthful, Bella. I'm a dentist and not an impresario. The girl wants it your way and what she wants I want. We're yours if you want us, and name your terms. There's my hand on it."

As Kitty and Sierra recounted it later, you could bank on the Charlottenburg not to overplay. With her paw pinning down her two mice, there were no recriminations, only a slow purr.

"Good, if that's the way you feel about it. We'll set about making Sandra Cassie Cassandra and *Europiums* a pair of names

that will fit the mouth of the entire country as easily as Siegel Cooper; Israel Zangwill; Kubelik and Castle Garden."

"Dearest Miss ——"

"Shush! Now run along to Brooklyn, you two tired, temperamental children. Rehearsal tomorrow at ten-thirty and the dotted line will be ready to sign for that tour out west-of-Hoboken, where we're going to beard America in her den. Scat, while we three frustrated old maids sit for a pensive hour, yearning over a beautiful and thoroughly useless article over there on the couch, known as Oliver Plow, and getting more and more frustrated because this baby shimmy I'm knitting is for somebody else's baby instead of for one of ours. Scat."

"Oh, you darling, darling Charlottenburg," cried Mrs. Galenzer, her tears falling over the hand that was impatient to get on with its knitting. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"That holds for me too," said the doctor, lifting his wife by the armpits and extending a hand that was shaking. "That holds for me too."

In the silence that followed their departure, the Charlottenburg resumed her knitting, the needles clicking smartly along the baby garment.

"The human race," she observed to the pink wool, "is predictable, if you guess right."



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## CHAPTER XIV

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THE morning that Kitty received a mauve note on Pretorious-Tweed stationery, she ran immediately downstairs for it, entering the Charlottenburg's bedroom simultaneously with her knock.

In the midst of hauling on a heavily boned corset, the Charlottenburg looked up with unconcealed annoyance.

"What a goddam thing to do! Close that door. I hate being barged in on while I'm in my pants!"

Already shirtwaisted, her small face never at its best before noon, Kitty seated herself on the edge of the Charlottenburg's unmade bed.

"Listen to this from Elsie Tweed: 'Dear Kitty, I have been thinking over your idea about my buying a Winged Victory. I know I shouldn't, with my own Winton Six sedan only a year old, but that little jewel box we saw in the Winged Victory showrooms, that day after lunch as we happened to be passing, sticks in my mind. It's sweet of you to have set your heart on my having it! Let's go buy it. I'll call for you today at ten. But do be your cleverest, Kitty, and enchant that big, handsome salesman into giving me a fat discount. Tweed comes home from the bank these days with a face a yard long. That bad old President Teddy Roosevelt in the White House isn't doing so much for prosperity, and Tweed gives me that poor-as-hell feeling. Do jew

the handsome salesman down, Kitty. Even at twenty-eight hundred, Tweed is going to let out an awful ouch. Get it down another twenty per cent. You're so clever! See you at ten, Elsie.' "

Laced now into the immense corset, her clean white chemise containing her shoved-up breasts, the Charlottenburg stepped into her "rainy day" skirt, hauling it around her waistline.

"In other words, the Winged Victory people are already giving you that twenty off as your rake-off in the transaction."

"How did you guess?"

"How did I guess that you've been sicking Elsie on to this purchase of a new Victory with the idea of the commission? My dear Kitten, you underestimate my appreciation of you!"

"Isn't it cricket?"

"Good God, Tommy and Elsie have wasted enough inherited money to wipe poverty out of the town of Marietta, Ohio, whatever and wherever Marietta, Ohio, may be. Soak the pants off them."

"That's all very well, but the low-down fact of the matter is, I haven't quite put it to Elsie that way. She doesn't know that I've been in what you might call 'cahoots' with the Winged Victory boys."

"Come clean. Tell all. Elsie probably knows anyway that no one could look as if butter would melt in her Kitty-puss mouth, the way you do, and actually be that way. Elsie may be dumb, but she's shrewd as hell when it comes to holding on to what she's got."

"That's exactly my point. She knows perfectly well that I turn my pennies where I can, but she's rich enough to be able to afford to be small over money matters. She's looking to me to save her that few hundred dollars, even if it takes my commission to do it."

"Don't be a fool, Kit. Remember, a woman in business has to be twice as shrewd as a man, in order to get along half as well. But don't do anything you can't face yourself with in the mirror. You don't like the smell of what you're doing, do you?"

"It's the sort of thing I couldn't imagine Sierra doing."

"If she's your yardstick, measure up. It's a tall one, though. I know, because when I don't think so much of me, which is goddam most of the time, I say to myself, 'What the hell do I

care about what and how Sierra would do it.' But just the same I do care, and a damn lot, too."

"I'm a low creature by instinct, Charlottenburg. You've got breeding. I have to acquire mine, the way you would a taste for smoked turkey. All Mullanes lie, cheat, steal, or would like to. But we won't go into that. The point is, I'd like to do business with the Winged Victory people on that car for Elsie. There isn't a chance to shave the price another penny, without digging into my commission."

"Tell Elsie just that! You might further explain that ladies of alleged virtue must live. Not all of us have the endurance to marry nitwit millionaires, or the wits to have them without marrying them."

"I have such important reasons for wanting Elsie to think a lot of me before she goes to the new house in Cape May that Tommy is giving her for a birthday present. I want to do that house. I itch like hives to do that house."

"As if, my darling," said the Charlottenburg, shirtwaisted now, and slitting her first morning letter, "you didn't have a reason for every move of that perfectly organized small body of yours. And now, having barged in on me during the sacred panty stage of my day, vamoose, my kitten, while I settle down to what I hope will be a yeoman's breakfast of three eggs and a rasher, but alone, by myself, solo, as it were. It's a day that looks goddam bad from the start. Why did I ever get myself involved in that rabbit-farm project with that Simms fellow. You were right, Kit. Women have ermine blood. They just won't wear rabbit fur. Read this."

"Darling, why should I. Didn't I tell you so in the beginning?"

"Well then, tell Ellen bacon and eggs, three of them, with their eyes open and quick! That's the way mine need to be if I'm going to find a way to make the ladies, bless their goddam souls, deck themselves out in rabbit fur."

Every morning at nine, Elsie Tweed's Winton Six, standing high and handsome at the curb, a uniformed young chauffeur named Byrd at the wheel, waited outside the Pretorious-Tweed brownstone mansion to drive Tommy Tweed as far as Twenty-third Street, where he dove into the subway for Wall Street.

Then the car returned to Thirty-sixth Street, to find Elsie, hatted and gloved, waiting in the hall.

These mornings of shopping, or driving along the avenue, or through the park; of hairdressings, fittings, occasionally interspersed with Morning Choral Society at the Hoffman House, or the Waldorf-Astoria, were more recreation for Elsie than her afternoon and evening activities, which contained the events for which much of the morning was preparatory.

Her mornings, aided and abetted by Kitty, meant bickering, dickering and woman-talk, and Elsie reveled in all these. She marked her growing intimacy with Kitty a milestone, and liked having her along on these expeditions. Kitty was one of the people to whom you could reveal small and private economies without feeling shamefaced. Kitty was one of those rare people who took on the mental coloration of the person with whom she happened to be, suiting ideas and ideals to the moment. Kitty set no standards and so was willing to abide by yours. A jewel of a find, this smart nobody from nowhere, who was going somewhere. It didn't even matter that Elsie's shoulders were serving Kitty as springboard into that somewhere. Elsie was smart enough to know that, and knowing it, liked it in an objective, shrewd and amused way.

This would not have been the case had Kitty been less than helpful. But good Lord, she was the smartest thing this side of Jericho. Just to have her along on a shopping tour, was an adventure in economy. When you shopped with Kitty, you found the little side-street places, or better still, followed her through a code of shenanigans which led to entry to the wholesale houses. Kitty's technique was to strike as closely as possible to the source. Smartest thing this side of Jericho, that's what she was. And as for her flair for novelty and originality! She was worth whatever she was costing, even if there were little transactions between dealer and Kitty, that Elsie wasn't supposed to know about. Things more than equalized themselves.

Take that one little idea of pansies to float in finger bowls, their faces slightly touched up with colored inks to give them amusing expression. That small device, trumped up by Kitty for Elsie's dinner to the Sewald Pretorieties of Atlanta, had earned mention in at least half a dozen columns of society patter. A trifle,

of course, but little things like that could catch on in a big way. Applause had come to Elsie on the strength of those little painted faces!

And who but this Kitty Mullane could have thought up Elsie's lace curtain costume for the Opera Society's Annual Fancy Dress Ball, or the rabbit-fur toque and muff which Kitty had designed to be worn with her star sapphires. Just ordinary dyed rabbit, mind you, and Elsie had again made the society columns and inaugurated a fashion!

In the long run, it paid to have Kitty about, even though Elsie was well aware by now of the exquisite precision of the processes by way of which, a few years previous, she had maneuvered her into that star sapphire set. But that had been worth it, too! The star sapphires, set in ailanthus leaves, had been photographed on Elsie's neck and arms, for newspaper and magazine. Labeled "star sapphires for Mrs. Pretorious-Tweed. Designed and executed by Kitty Mullane," this set had traveled across country, as a prize exhibit in a vocational arts traveling exposition.

The amazing Mullane, Elsie told her friends, had actually hired a press agent for these sapphires, treating them as you would a Melba or a Lillian Russell, getting space for them in newspapers, with photographs. After all, as Elsie well knew but did not go on to say, they weren't even first-rate star sapphires; couldn't be for that money. But Kitty's talent for getting them exploited was phenomenal, and well, all Elsie could say was, "smart" was the word for Kitty. She certainly took the cake.

So, in the easy long run, it paid to have Kitty about. Elsie, whose incomes from inherited wealth in her own right were reputed to be even larger than her husband's, practiced her petty economies with none of the furtiveness of the lean of purse.

When Elsie Tweed, in a mink coat, did her own marketing in order to guard against possible collusion between her butler and preferred tradesmen, her friends softly impeached her for "eccentricities."

"If only I were rich enough to practice frank economies," wailed Kitty. "It's the badge of poverty when I do it, and poverty is failure and nothing succeeds like success."

The morning of the impending purchase of the Winged Victory, they drove first through Central Park, Elsie in the rabbit

tippet and toque of Kitty's designing, Kitty in a picture hat and willow plume that had been presented to her by the small French milliner to whom she had brought Elsie as a customer.

The park scene was rigid as iron, its trees stripped under the still cold of a January day that, even in its sunshine, hovered down around zero.

The Winton Six, the open variety with adjustable top, leaked drafts through its curtains.

"Tommy simply has no right to expose me to pneumonia in this icebox of a car. If he wants to do it to himself, that's one thing," burst forth Elsie, in a sudden fit of chill and peeve, "but——"

"I can never understand, Elsie," interposed Kitty, "the way you permit yourself to be deprived of the best there is. You can afford it. As if you've not a right to a Winged Victory!"

"But you see, dearie, I want Tommy to pay for it——"

"But what does it matter, Elsie?" You've both so much!"

"Yes, but if you'd know the number of foul bills I'm footing this month. There's my sister Fletta's husband, who is costing me his weight in gold in order to save family scandal. May you never know the devilishness of that!"

Might she never know! Even as she rode along beside Elsie, a special delivery letter was plastered against the flesh of her bare chest. It had arrived that morning from her indigent brother Sweeney, in St. Louis, and was branding her with knowing just this sort of thing. Sweeney had broken his prison parole! But you did not reveal the seamy side of your own experience to Elsie. It was interesting, not to say fascinating, to see Elsie scamper away from facing realities of unpretty nature. A turn down a mean street drew a sharp word to her coachman or chauffeur. A new housemaid, inadvertently discovered to have a missing third finger, was dismissed without explanation. You never mentioned death to Elsie, or sickness, although she could lie elaborately in bed of a slight indisposition and, decked in pink negligee and marabou, receive her friends. Routine checks went to philanthropic organizations, but street beggars were eyesores, not to be tolerated.

Recognizing this, part of Kitty's self-established mission was to keep the fabric of Elsie's days silky. Gaiety and efficiency were

the two precarious commodities Kitty had for sale. Thus far, even considering the sapphires, they had not brought her as much in financial remuneration as they had in a subtle and steadily growing relationship with a woman who had to give, even more than by way of profit, what Kitty wanted. And what Kitty wanted, over and above anything that might accrue to her always too lean bank account, were the contacts to be achieved by this growing friendship with no less a social factor than a Prætorious-Tweed.

The time had come at last, gradually—damned gradually, Kitty would have told you—when by way of connections achieved by way of Elsie, she was beginning to reap. At last, subtly, she was becoming almost indispensable to Elsie; part of her daily pattern as it were. Not because of Elsie's impulse to give a smart girl a leg up, but because it was becoming more and more convenient to have Kitty present at dinners, house parties, functions of this and that nature, where the Mullane personality and originality were invaluable.

It was highly desirable this minute to have Kitty as part of the kind of day that stretched before Elsie, a day which included a series of activities in which the Mullane judgment and advice, to say nothing of shrewdness and manner of procedure, were almost sure to prove important.

You could, for instance, count on Anton, the hairdresser, to do a better coiffure if Kitty were along to direct the placing of the puffs behind the high pompadour. Elsie's compensation was to treat Kitty to a hairdress. It was nice to have Kitty along.

It was nice to have Kitty along while she shopped for provender. How she knew where to go and how to handle tradesfolk! Trust Kitty to track down the best places in town for white bait for Tommy's Sunday morning breakfast parties; trust Kitty to track down that Brooklyn confectioner who baked birthday cakes with music boxes in them; and to know where to shop for commodities, from thumb tacks with Raphael cherubs for heads, to musical chairs, to a miracle of a washing machine that reduced laundress bills by sixty per cent.

Who but Kitty could have managed that rebate on that expensive suède suit of Elsie's that had worn bald where you sat down? Who but Kitty could have prevailed upon Sloane's to

take back that plush love seat after it had been in the house for a month? Who but Kitty could have done over the blue room with such taste and economy? Who was chattier, gayer, or so easily on call to fill in at a function?

Who but Kitty, for instance, could swing this matter of the Winged Victory with such efficiency and economy? Perhaps she expected her rake-off in the transaction; well, let her have it if she could shave things any finer, after Elsie had seen to it that the whittling was not to come from the Tweed side of the negotiation.

The Winged Victory loomed large in a day already crammed with the kind of inconsequentialities that kept Elsie a very busy woman.

"Let's see about the Winged Victory immediately after I've had my steam bath. Have one on me while you wait, Kitty."

"That's pretty of you, Elsie. Do you mind if I have a silver vapor, instead? I could do with one to open up some stubborn pores. Only a silver vapor costs too much per pore for me, so poor Kitts does without."

"You will get them down another two hundred on the sedan, won't you, Kitty?"

"I've sweated them terribly as it is, Elsie."

"Sweat them a little more. You've no idea how much less twenty-six hundred is going to sound to Tommy than twenty-eight hundred. His ear is made that way. Get this price down for me, Kit, and then I want to go into the matter of that gold and topaz necklace for Sally's birthday."

"I want terribly to do that necklace, Elsie, but I can't squeeze the turnip any drier. It's a wonderful Winged Victory buy at twenty-eight hundred and even that is a dead secret, which means someone at the selling end pays the difference between that and what goes on the books. Besides, I've a duck of an idea about the Victory sedan, Elsie."

"Don't tell it to me until I have the car. I won't take it except at my price."

"Well then, we'll use my idea on some other sedan at some other time."

"But I want the Victory, now!"

"Well then, here's my idea. I don't see why, Elsie, the interior



of a car shouldn't reflect the owner just as much as a room can. I've a plan for doing a Victory, if not for you, then for someone else, in chintzy boudoir colors, but without the chintz. No reason why a car interior need give you the Pullman blues. I can see a flowered rose rep for you, Elsie. Warm in winter, cool in summer. A rose color with enough gray in it offsets dust."

"Darling idea!"

"Rose rep curtains, flower holders with primroses, and a pink enameled wall vanity with a primrose design. We'll do the house at Cape May to match."

"Kitty, you're a genius. Kitty, you're a devil, tempting me. Kitty, what makes you think you're going to do the house at Cape May?"

"Lillian Russell's sedan is done in a kind of gray-blue that doesn't do a thing for her lovely skin. We'll make you as rosy as a baby in a bassinet."

"Let's select the color this afternoon, Kit!"

"Elsie, you talk as if poor Kitty didn't have a living to earn. Ladies must eat, darling. In fact, three of us at Twenty-one East must eat."

"Let that rich Miss Baldwin foot the bills. She's oozy with money."

"Yes, but we operate on a strictly one-third basis, and for such a high-minded reason. What Sierra has over and above income, she gives away to the poor. It's a religion with the Charlottenburg that we operate on a one-third basis. Of course, I agree, or I'm shamed into agreeing——"

"Shameless Kitty!"

"I've simply got to go traipsing to Lord and Taylor's this afternoon, Elsie. I'm trying to get their goddammed little buyer in the jewelry department to let me do a window display of my Sweetheart rings."

"Stay on with me, Kits, and make that big handsome fellow at the Winged Victory give you a commission on the sedan he is going to let me have for twenty-six hundred. After all, you brought him a customer."

"Why, Elsie, he can't let it go that close and make sufficient commission himself, even if the company would permit, to buy postage stamps for his wife. Besides, I wouldn't dream of——"

"Stuff and nonsense! Business is business. Of course, it's never entered your head, but you're also entitled to a commission yourself. It doesn't cost me a penny that you should have it, and a business man like Wayne would tell you you're entitled to it."

"But Elsie—you're my friend, not my customer."

"Don't be silly; why can't I be both? If you don't ask for it, I will."

"No, no, I'll ask!"

"Of course you never thought of it, but ten per cent on twenty-six hundred is more than you could earn selling Sweetheart rings to Lord and Taylor."

"No, it never occurred to me, but——"

"Don't be absurd. Ten per cent on twenty-six hundred is a good enough day's work. Besides, I'll invite you to Cape May as my house guest for the summer and my bet is you'll pluck off half a dozen commissions to fix over some of those horrors of houses down there. Come, we'll go get steam-bathed and then for our ten per cent."

"Of course, Elsie, when you put it that way—only understand—the suggestion comes from you."

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## CHAPTER XV

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JOHN BALDWIN'S state of chronic and growingly manifest arthritis, which slowed him down immeasurably, was responsible for what had become Sierra's regular habit of dining at her father's house on Wednesday evenings.

By now his activities were reduced to mornings in his offices in Nassau Street, where a minimized force operated his minimized affairs. Afternoons were spent in the Sky Club, an organization of brokers and realty promoters that maintained quarters in a Pine Street office building. About half the time, a quorum for medium-stake poker or rummy could be assembled there after Exchange hours. The days when this did not happen were dull affairs for Baldwin, who would sit in a window-embrasure overlooking the harbor, half-dozing but hopefully alert to the opening of a door.

The metamorphosis from his highly charged life during the Baldwin boom days into this more or less uniform existence had been sufficiently gradual to spare him any sudden shock of the transition that was happening.

So, too, the quiet evenings in the house in Murray Hill had come to be accepted as casually as the early drawing on of the bedroom slippers, which Leonore, in her impeccable capacity for creature details, had waiting for him.

It was as if John Baldwin were slowly walking a flight of stairs and had come gradually to a quiet landing at the beginnings of old age.

The tempo and meaning of his existence had changed, not alone because of his wife, who arranged his life to conform to the secret needs of her own for time to herself, but also, his doctors would have told you, because his arteries were neither old nor young for a man of his years, but just about as old as he was; and when he had been married to Leonore for five years, Baldwin was approaching seventy-two.

However obviously this immaculate behavior on the part of Leonore might have appeared to be conscience money, no one could back up this supposition with fact. To the eyes of every observer, Oliver Plow's place in the household, however Baldwin may have regarded him, both as a member of it and a member of his office force, was casual and taken for granted.

As a matter of fact, it was a remarkably mellow and receptive home which Leonore had achieved out of a brownstone monument to the pomp and absurd circumstance of her predecessor.

In these years of his marriage to her, Baldwin, who had once felt about this house in Murray Hill as if it were a museum that contained the freak exhibit of his family, had learned now to return to it gratefully, for its pleasant savor of quiet dignity, its going fireplaces, tea-and-hot-muffins at dusk, and some subtle indefinable quality that no longer gave a man the feeling of coming back at night to a home that had about as much repose about it as a flying trapeze.

To be sure, even now the guests he sometimes found in it were an alien race, men and women of a gentler circumscribed world, who italicized, by contrast, the bygone goings-on of Mamie. But as the years went by, Leonore, also made ill at ease by Baldwin's state of being ill at ease, was content to carry on her social life alone, leaving Baldwin to pleasures of his own devices, chiefly solitaire or chess, at home.

You could trust Leonore to carry through that cleavage of interests with a fine discretion. For luncheons or afternoons, she allowed herself full leeway. But it was only the rare evening occasion, such as theater or opera, that she permitted herself, and then only in the company of her stepson or a married couple.

But most of the evenings were quietly at home, Baldwin, his arthritic ankle elevated, at pinochle or rummy with Leonore or Oliver, or both; the atmosphere warmed and warming.

It was the same at the summer camp in the Adirondacks, a one-time two-thousand-acre holding, with a forty-room camp. Baldwin had sold off most of this land, including the immense building, retaining for himself a two-hundred-acre strip on which he erected a cabin of comfortable and modest proportion. Here, too, Leonore created the feeling that the summer perfection of outdoor evenings over mountain and pine, was something she could at least successfully match by the indoor perfection of her log fire and justly celebrated gin fizzes.

A man wanted to stay at home in rooms that bore the imprint of Leonore's capacity for coziness. These were rooms that contained the perfume of a woman, pillows that had been shaken and patted by woman hands, easily reachable objects, such as the right periodicals on low tables, cigars under hand, another pillow easily available, whisky and soda, snacks, pipe tobacco, Wall Street sections of the daily paper, card decks within touch.

These Wednesday evenings, rather strictly *en famille*, had come to be a sort of small tradition.

They had come to be somewhat precious tradition to Sierra, and she would not have admitted, even to herself, that the reason she so seldom pressed the inclusion of Kitty or Charlottenburg at these weekly foregatherings was because, without them, they frequently offered her a half hour or so of quiet talk with Oliver, alone.

This usually happened about nine-thirty o'clock, when her father, after an hour or so of cards, pushed back his chair because of a fatigue he could not control. Along about then, inexplicable and somewhat frightening to a man who in the first sixty-five years of his life had never known a day in bed, this sudden fatigue came down over Baldwin, blanching him with pallor.

Impeccably attentive to his well-being, Leonore would push a chair back also, and follow him to his room. The routine thereafter had precision. In about half an hour she would return, in something trailing and negligee, a quality, fine as a hair, in her manner giving her stepdaughter the impulse for departure. Even Oliver's invariably proffered escort to Twenty-one East was re-

fused with like invariability, because of that same quality, thin as a hairline, that lay across the design of Leonore's attitude. Oliver was not to escort Sierra home! Make no mistake about that.

All of this, along with the benign qualities which Leonore had instilled into the house, reached out to greet Sierra every time she entered it these Wednesday evenings. Wood fires smelled. The hallways, which had been perennially chilly in a house difficult to heat, contained soft warmth and hint of the perfumes of Leonore. Stairs that had resounded from insufficient padding beneath carpeting were newly covered and recorded no footsteps. In an umbrella stand beside the hatrack, Oliver's canes gave off their exciting suggestion of his presence.

Here, nowadays, was a household free of the hair-raising vagaries of a mistress who, in Mamie's time, had dressed her servants in livery that might have been designed for the Wizard of Oz, and whose fantastic traditions out of Silver City had lain so closely beneath the plush upholstery.

Not even the subsequent regime under Sierra had dissipated the flamboyancies of Mamie. Sierra had let them wave on, her inertia, where household matters or taste were concerned, stronger, apparently, than her sensitiveness to her mother's exuberances.

This inertia, combined with the inadequacies of Florence, made Leonore's triumph over the ridiculous inheritance of the old Baldwin mansion obvious at its very threshold.

It made Sierra's homecomings both a reprimand and a lure, because she could count on the very element which might have enhanced her sense of estrangement, namely Oliver's occupancy of her old rooms at the top of the house, to italicize her pleasure.

There was something about that circumstance—Oliver sleeping and waking in rooms whose very timbers must be packed with the vibrations of her youth—which quickened and excited. There was something about it! So was there something pungent in the effect of those malacca canes of his, leaning in the umbrella stand. They seemed to pervade, as an odor pervades, the personality of the stepson of her father's wife.

The Wednesday evening following Kitty's ride in the park with Elsie Tweed, Oliver was in the act of placing one of these malacca canes in the stand as Sierra entered.

He had changed not too perceptibly during these years of Leonore's marriage to Baldwin. Except for the clean-shaved upper lip, where once had been the clipped hedge of mustache, and which if anything had the effect of making him appear younger, the years had started no erosive processes upon that straight slim body. The smattering of gray in blond hair was scarcely noticeable; the planes of the face, austere thin, were flat and hard as boards. Despite the lassitude with which he relaxed back against life as if it were his armchair, you had the feeling that Oliver, so effete, fitted badly into this background of stability and permanence.

He had about him that air of perpetual guest. He suggested none of the mechanics of life, such as kitchens, workshops, engine rooms, or, perhaps least of all, the ledgers and account books among which he spent his days.

Rather, he seemed, and for that matter was, the personable "odd man" who places his high hat and muffler on the hall tables of the many fine houses where hostesses, perpetually short of that unattached man, are eager to offer him, in exchange for rounding out their dinner tables, libation of Barsac, champagne of perfection vintage, fodder of pheasant and *pâté de foie gras*.

Yet, far from being the transient guest at the house in Murray Hill, Oliver, except for the two weeks' vacation he received, like any other desk employee at Baldwin Company, Inc., was practically the household's most consistent occupant, remaining there on those occasions when John and Leonore journeyed southward or to Europe. Indeed, except for the pair of weeks he spent with them at the semi-luxurious summer camp, Oliver continued to occupy his rooms even when the house was deserted and the servants had been transplanted to the Adirondacks for the duration of the summer.

But these periods of the protracted absence of the Baldwins from the house in Murray Hill were rare. Leonore's friends could have, or would have, told you why. Plain as the nose on your face. John Baldwin didn't know enough about women to go in out of the rain. Having her cake and eating it too was Leonore's game. Trust a clever woman like Leonore to be naughty in the perfect manner.

In any event, Oliver, who on his salary could only have af-

forded the traditional hall bedroom, continued on in Sierra's one-time suite, going through the weekly gesture of placing on Leonore's desk an envelope containing the few disproportionate room rent his salary enabled him to pay.

This negligible sum Leonore turned over to John with the pretentious impeccability with which she met every aspect of the situation where her stepson was concerned. This money represented the upkeep of Oliver's alleged self-respect. How many times that sum, doubled and quadrupled, found its way back into his pockets was merely more surmise on the part of those to whom the relationship of Leonore to her stepson was the subject of continual scrutiny, appraisal, conjecture and worse.

Encountering Oliver in the hallway in this manner was contrary to the established precedent of these Wednesday evenings. Usually by the time Sierra, in day clothes, arrived at the punctual hour of seven, he was already established with Leonore and John Baldwin beside the library fireplace.

"Why, Oliver, isn't this late for you!" inquired Sierra, unwinding her mannish muffler, which she wore in lieu of the rich assortment of furs, including sable and chinchilla, which she had inherited from her mother and passed on to Florence.

He turned his full face toward her, revealing pallor, even for him.

"Are you ill, Oliver?"

"A devil of an ulcerated tooth," he said, taking her hand in that softly retentive clasp so peculiarly his. "I stopped at my dentist for a lancing."

"Why, you poor thing!" she cried; and then, as if shocked that the sound of her voice was so tender, followed up in one carefully leveled: "That's bad. Did he fix you up?"

"I'd feel fine if I could take off my head."

She placed her hand on his arm.

"You're dead on your feet!"

"Yes, the demise must have taken place today about three-thirty, when the nerves began their cakewalk. But the hired boy didn't dare walk out of the office on the old man."

"Oliver, don't be like that. Father wouldn't have minded."

"Perhaps not, but I seem to lie close to a region known as his nerves."



"Nonsense. That is just Father being a tired old man, with most of his future behind him."

"And so much of his present cluttered with poor and superfluous step-relations. I don't blame him, though. Can't expect everybody to have your talent, Sierra, for putting up with the submerged nine-tenths of the nine-tenths of us who can't make a go of it under our own steam."

He placed the palm of his soft hand against her cheek, his voice laid over with the identical caressing patina which characterized it when saying something tender to a woman or asking a waiter for salt.

"But in any event, what is being an underpaid clerk in your stepmother's husband's office, compared to the fact that every seven days comes Wednesday, and every Wednesday comes Sierra."

"Tut," she said with her heart in her throat, as they entered the library. Seated beside Baldwin before the going fireplace, Leonore rose, her eyes rushing past Sierra to Oliver. Before she could speak, he made a mock grimace by blowing out one cheek.

"Ollie, is it still aching! You must see a dentist."

"I've just come from Dr. Winn."

Her face seemed to sag and age.

"You went without me?"

He pinched her cheek softly.

"Ulcerated teeth aren't pretty business. I'm all fixed up now, and shall reek softly of ether for you through dinner."

She turned to Sierra, the luster gone from her face.

"Hullo, Sierra, and congratulations!"

"Why congratulations?" she asked, crossing the fireplace to place a light kiss above her father's eyebrow.

"Why congratulations?" repeated Leonore, reseating herself and keeping her gaze carefully averted from Oliver. "Isn't it cause for congratulation that the *Times* carried an article about your plan for a girls' hotel, or is it club or boarding house? In any event, it was a big spread about your 'project,' I believe they called it, just as if it were a new trust company or something."

"That was a week ago, Leonore."

"Yes, but your father just showed it to me tonight. I think you

women are just wonderful nowadays. Imagine a hotel for working girls. Only, dear Sierra, what will working girls do with one?"

"If you were to see them as I see them, Leonore, cooped up in airless hall bedrooms, the victims of bad mental and physical hygiene, you would know soon enough——"

"But, dear, don't working girls live with their families?"

"Alas, thousands do, in tenements as dark and airless as hall bedrooms. But our concern is with the girl on her own, who hasn't even the tenement home as background. Father, a little later I'd like to talk to you about an idea for floating bonds, which has been suggested by the realty people."

"Getting beyond your depth, girl!"

"No, Father! You see——"

"And Sierra, is it true that Elsie Tweed is taking Kitty on to do her new house at Cape May?"

"It's not quite certain yet. You know Elsie. But it looks as if she might. Who told you?"

"Elsie's hairdresser."

"That's a better and later bulletin than I have."

"But, Sierra, between us, there should be limits to the cleverness of clever females. So far as I know, Kitty hasn't ever decorated anything except her own interior with very good food."

"Kitty has a nose for the right object in the right spot."

"You can't smell Chippendale."

"Kitty can."

"Kitty, my dear Leonore, is a notoriously talented fixer of finery, food, fashions, and furniture," interposed Oliver, who knew by now that he was out of favor, and why.

Keeping her offended eyes carefully averted from her stepson, Leonore pursued, unheeding.

"Elsie is an awful tightwad. One miss on the part of Kits, even an inexpensive one, can cost her the royal favor."

"She won't slip. I agree with Oliver," said Sierra, folding her hands in their attitude of calm on her lap. "Kitty is a sort of minor poet, singing away for dear life in the small creative mediums. It's as natural for her to design jewelry, dinners, stage sets, drawing rooms, hats, euchre prizes, burnt-wood plaques, cotillions, favors and spun-sugar desserts as it is for Sargent to paint, or Bernhardt to act."

"That, dear, is stuff and nonsense," said Leonore, her face full of strain as she continued to look resolutely past Oliver's amused eyes. "Kitty's great talent is not a small one. It is a big bouncing one for getting somewhere, on nothing, from nowhere."

"Now, Leonore, I wouldn't quite say that," protested Oliver, his manner teasing away at her, "those are high-power girls in Twenty-one East."

"Apparently nothing I can say is quite the way you would say it, Oliver."

"Tut," he said, and, without rising, strained to reach for a cigarette from a silver box of them on a table.

Baldwin rumbled into a silent kind of laughter.

"The fat one is the card! She could skin a louse and not touch an entrail."

"Father, what a thing to say about the Charlottenburg!"

"That big girl don't waste a motion."

"Isn't that what you admire in your business administration?" asked Sierra, repenting, the moment she had put it, what had been merely intended as a rhetorical question.

"Yes. The fellow who is going to live and die a clerk is the fellow with the most motions to waste."

"Sounds like we're getting around to the subject of me," said Oliver.

"They spend their motions as they spend their pay envelopes," pursued Baldwin, without notice of the interruption. "Uneconomically, hand-to-mouth and beyond their means. The average fellow who remains a clerk remains that way because he is scatter-brain and scatter-purpose."

"Getting around closer and closer to me."

"You are the best judge as to the fit of the shoe, young man."

On these rare occasions when Baldwin addressed a remark directly to Oliver, he did so without turning his eyes in his direction.

The old gentleman, Oliver had frequently observed, seems to have an idea that my face is pasted just below the picture molding, or exactly in the opposite direction from where I happen to be. I wonder if he'd recognize me if he met me on the street. He hasn't looked at me in years. When he barks an order to me in the office, he barks it in the opposite direction.

Usually when she was in the kind of unison with her stepson

which was so essential to her happiness, Leonore saw to it that the oblique state of things between her husband and stepson remained within the boundaries of mild caustics. But tonight, her dispirited eyes lowered as if of their own heaviness, she let a long pause shape itself before dinner was announced and the group took its accustomed pattern at the candlelit table.

The subject carried over to the dining room, where Leonore, too offended at Oliver's rebuff to her solicitude to urge upon him the foods he refused, directed her charm and solicitude toward her husband and Sierra.

"Well, whatever your father may have to say about your fat friend, Sierra, he is the ardent champion of all three of you. I tell him he ought to get out and march at the head of one of those woman's rights parades."

"Let them have the vote if they want it," boomed Baldwin. "They'll soon poke it in the back of the dresser drawer along with their old gloves, after the novelty has worn off."

"Your father should write a book," volunteered Oliver, "of homely axioms about women. I'll wager they won't be about homely women."

This did bring a dry rumbling chuckle from Baldwin, which, however, he directed to Sierra.

"It's too bad to give women the rope to hang themselves with. Without the vote they could have gone on indefinitely bawling about the great things they would do with it if they had it. Once they got it, the cat was out of the bag. They're not going to do anything with it that the men haven't done before them, and they are going to do that just as badly in the bad places and no better in the good."

"Well, I'm free to admit," said Leonore, looking over her stepson's head, "I want and need the vote about as much as I want and need Teddy Roosevelt's slouch hat. And don't you worry. Take a woman like Kitty Mullane. She no more wants the vote than the men want to give it to her. Isn't it so, Sierra?"

"I wouldn't say that, Leonore. It isn't that we don't want it. It's rather that we are not sufficiently against not having it."

"Those two girls you live with are for those two girls."

"Aren't we all, Leonore, more or less?"

"No. You're not. You won't wear a fur collar around your

neck when it's cold, because there are cold necks in the world that can't afford to have them. You spend your time in smelly tenements, visiting women who have too many children, because you seem to think the human race matters enough to worry about. You spend your money on the world you live in, and not on yourself who lives in it. A person has got to feel that way in order to be able to spend her fortune trying to build a hotel where working girls can warm their toes. Am I right, John?"

"It's her money," replied her father, cryptically and not to the point.

"But your two girl friends are too clever to go in for banner-waving. They get as they go, and leave the banner-waving to the votes-for-women crowd that used to parade up Fifth Avenue without getting anywhere except to the polls; and then what?"

"Aren't you leaning a bit toward lavender and old lace, Leonore?"

For the first time during dinner, Leonore permitted her eyes to paste themselves flatly against her stepson's.

"You bet I am. Just an old-fashioned girl for lovin' and bein' loved."

"Well," drawled Baldwin, not following his wife's eyes, "any way you look at it, I like the fat Ames gal. She's a general! Maps her battles and fights 'em through. Take that venture of hers that didn't make any more sense than an electric rickshaw, Europium dancing or something or other. Darndest humbug between here and Europa, wherever that is, and look at the money she's cashing in."

"Yes, correspondence courses in Europium dancing are proving to be the gold mine of the whole enterprise. You're right, Father. When Europium failed as entertainment, only a Charlottenburg could have salvaged the idea and turned it into a weight-reducing method. She already has studios in six cities, her Europium reducing manual is selling by the tens of thousands, and a Brooklyn girl named Cassandra has become the modern Venus de Milo of ideal Europium measurements."

"Any woman with the Ames figure who can teach weight reduction could sell Brooklyn Bridge to Diamond Jim Brady."

"Her idea for rabbit-raising alone, is genius. She's got one per cent genius to ninety-nine per cent horse sense. I'll take that in

preference to the other way round. If I was a younger man, I'd go into rabbit-raising with her in a big way ——"

"Father, can I tell the Charlottenburg you want to back her?"

"You can tell her nothing of the sort. She's too fast and too smart for an old man like me."

"Oh, John, with such a clever daughter, and her clever friends, to think you can even tolerate poor Leonore-sit-by-the-fire."

Inured, by now, to this kind of tactic from his wife, Baldwin regarded the amused and somewhat patiently enduring face of Sierra across the top of his spectacles.

"I figure you gals as just out of step a bit, or is it us who are out of step?"

"I don't think I've ever thought about it one way or another, Father. It's just my natural step, I guess, whether it's in or out. It's you who are a step ahead, Father, by granting your pair of daughters their legacies ahead of time and not only permitting us to do as we please, but giving us the wherewithal to do it."

"It's your playmates we're talking about, Sierra," interrupted Leonore, sharply. "That pair thinks out every step they take, and cleverly too."

"Why shouldn't they, Leonore?"

"I'm not criticizing, Sierra. Certainly, why shouldn't they. That's why I say, those two are going wherever they've a mind to. They know exactly what they want, and they'll climb anybody's shoulders to get it."

"The fat one certainly climbed mine," chuckled Baldwin. "But she's a square shooter and pays up. That time I loaned her five hundred on a bonanza of a scheme some fellow brought her for iceless iceboxes, she paid up in installments, but she paid. The idea was a first-rater, but in the wrong hands. I'm for the fat one."

"Oh, I suppose it's all fair enough, if you care about being that kind of person. You're not, Sierra."

"But I am."

"You, too, think your way through, but not for personal reasons. You care about people in dirty rooms and children with dirty noses, but the things you try to do about it are for them. Not for yourself."

"Kitty and the Charlottenburg care about beauty and happiness

and shining adventure, not only for themselves, but for as many as will ride along."

"I glory in your standing by your friends. This little ole homebody is proud of you new women. The men folks better watch out, the days of cozy-woozies like me are passing! I'm afraid, John, you've got a clinging vine in your hair, named me."

Beatitude stamped across his face, Baldwin leaned toward his wife.

"I like you there, Nellie," he said, trying to keep his voice and face casual.

"Father, you're sweet!" exclaimed Sierra.

"Leonore is the sweet one," he replied. "Comes as naturally to her as being one of these suffering-cat suffragettes would come unnatural to her."

"Hear that!" cried Leonore, leaning forward until the low bust-line of her gown revealed the parting of creamy flesh. "Ollie, I think my husband's flirting with me!"

For the first time their eyes met in full, hers like a child's, being malicious.

"What am I supposed to do about that, my dear?" he asked.

"Be sweet, civil and interested."

"Consider me all three."

Their smiles, on edge, appearing with almost mechanical precision across their faces, emphasized in Sierra, who sat between them, that sense which these two never failed to inspire within her; that sense of something going on here.

What was this between Leonore and Oliver? Whatever it was, it made an outcast of everyone who sat in the room with it. Securely within their fortress of impeccable behavior, their invisible technique made itself felt, as if something had brushed your cheek.

Time and time again, when this impression, light as wings, swept her consciousness, Sierra wondered about her father. What light and chilling winds of premonition reached him? Something phantom as breeze seemed to stir here. Or was it phantom?

Yet, what did it matter whether this thing between Leonore and Oliver had the reality of the flesh. There it was, tangible or intangible. You had only to enter this house, observe the elaborate casualness between two people never unconscious of one another,

in order to feel as much on the outside of this intangibility as if it were built of brick and mortar.

Regarding them at her father's table, the familiar chill of this realization moved down her spine.

How strange, these two! Old enough to have borne him as her own son, Leonore, sitting there sparkling with the electricity of his nearness. How strange. How forbidden! Something equally forbidden stirred within Sierra herself. Almost a sense of envy of Leonore!

As for Oliver! Three women in Twenty-one East had used up many a late evening of surmise over him.

For years he had sat in the midst of this force of Leonore desiring him. If not acquiescent to it, at least he was lulled, intimidated, dominated, call it what you will, by the security, by the self-dedication of a stepmother alert to his slightest mood or whim. Oliver was thirty-five now. No longer the slim strip of youth, something faintly goatlike was thickening up the former faunlike quality of Oliver. The backs of his hands had turned that way. The stronger growth of the hair at the nape of his neck. The eyes had turned that way. Due to a trick of the lids, rather than any turn of the mind, they had been prematurely sardonic eyes. But by now they had caught up with the general indefinable aging of a man who for so many years had seemed incapable of anything but youth.

What of Oliver, so inconsequential, yet to her, Sierra, so pervading? What of Oliver? Did the still water of him run deep or not at all? What did her father know or guess?

Watching Leonore, as they drew back from table, help her husband slowly to his arthritic feet, steer him gently up to his room after he had said good nights, it seemed scarcely possible he did not know or guess.

In about a half hour, Leonore would return, in flowing negligee, and following Sierra's departure for Twenty-one East, living room lights would burn long and late. They might even dim and shroud into greater privacy two who shared their insomnia deep into night after night. Stepmother and stepson.

As she joined Oliver in the living room after her father's good nights had been said, Sierra smiled inwardly at her feeling that



she must regard this small interval of time ahead as a gift from her father's wife. Not a voluntary one, to be sure. Outward calm but an inner turmoil must surely be Leonore's as she helped Baldwin to his early bed.

In the lamplit living room, so pervaded by the ingratiating atmosphere of the woman who was now in the room directly overhead, engaged in helping her husband to bed, Oliver lost no time in strewing himself along the divan.

"If these Wednesday evenings came twice a week, Sierra, it would be nicer," he said.

She sat down on the straight chair of her invariable choice, her hands in the placid design in her lap. She was as soundless as the passing of time.

"No, that would mean two general-cleaning days a week for too many tired housewives."

"Things like that never bother me. Guess I give nothing and I get less in return."

"You're not serious when you say such things of yourself?"

He pulled on his cigarette.

"Guess not," he said, gazing up at the ceiling across which he could hear Leonore's footsteps.

She wondered if he was thinking that he had given his youth and his dignity, and apparently his future, to her up there.

"Guess not," he repeated.

They both thought on into the ticking of a Sèvres clock that Leonore had allowed to survive from the era of Mamie.

A nerve in his cheek kept jumping, and he closed his eyes.

She wanted to speak about it, because each time she saw the quivering movement, something as concrete as pain seemed to dart through her.

She didn't, though. She just sat very still. She was devoid of any grace when it came to pampering the male. Assiduous to the last degree for her father's comfort, she had always avoided self-embarrassment by performing graceful deeds for him so that the act of doing them was exhibited in his presence as seldom as possible. She sat now and felt inhibited.

"I think I'll run along home early this evening, Oliver. My finance committee on the girls' hotel project meets at ten tomorrow and I'll need my wits."

"I like having you here," he said, without opening his eyes. "You're so tranquil, Sierra, and I think you're as tranquil as you seem to be. Mountains can seem tranquil enough when they are on the verge of erupting, but you're not one of those. You're quiet to the core. Now aren't you?"

She thought of her father's wife, whose footsteps she could hear. Hot lava flowed within Leonore in whose shadow her father dwelt with every semblance of peace and security. Was Oliver indulging in mental contrasts?

"Funny thing, Sierra," he continued, "but I don't even have my usual damned sense of failure when you're around. You give a fellow the feeling a mountain does. A few years—and hooey, we're gone. All things pass, but time goes on and mountains and streams. Transient things don't matter I guess, unless God keeps books."

"It's the transient things, Oliver, that make up God's ledger. They must have their meaning and importance, or we wouldn't have the impulse to carry on."

"I haven't."

"Things do matter, Oliver. Happiness matters! Therefore slums and sick babies and unprotected old people and disease and ugliness and poverty and injustice and crime and cancer matter, because they destroy happiness and must be conquered."

"What law of life has ever given man the right to think he is entitled to happiness? Even babies and dumb animals are born to suffer. We're here because we're here. Nature guarantees nothing nor obligates herself."

"Oh, Ollie!"

"Oh, what, Sierra," he said, raising himself on his elbow and regarding her with his indolent eyes.

"I mean—I mean, Oliver, men have proved there is such a thing as happiness."

"Men and women—together—perhaps, if you get what I mean. Male and female."

That had been what she meant. Men and women. Confusion flooded her, and embarrassment, as if an intruder had walked into the privacy of her room and found her naked.

"I mean—not enough of us are happy. It becomes up to us

then, to make it a world where there is greater good for a greater number."

"Forget your cosmic urge, Sierra," he said, relaxing as if she had released a tension in him. "Concentrate on making me happy."

She had lost her fleeting moment. Something in her had failed her and him, and immediately Oliver was his bantering self again. It was as if he had opened his eyes to what he thought was a flash of something bright and had decided it was illusion. And yet his words, bantering again, shook her deeply within.

"But you haven't rickets, Oliver, or a runny nose to concentrate on in order to make you happy."

"My soul has 'em, and this damned side of my face has worse."

Overhead the footsteps continued, those of a woman impatient to return to her lover, while she tended her aging husband. Sierra wanted to say something to Oliver about his pain and about something else which she had not found the power to say to him in that fleeting instant before. She felt frantic to say what she had missed saying. It was now or never. The word rang in her mind like a slow bell. Now or never, never, never. But she continued to sit beside Oliver in his pain, her hands in their placid design in her lap, her dark still eyes on his face, but ready to swing away when his eyes opened.

"Sierra, what in God's name do you three girls in Twenty-one East want out of it all, and are you getting it?"

She would have loved to say, "Husbands and babies and the right to fold a hurting cheek dear to us, close to us." But Leonore trailed in then, her lacy negligee falling away from her arms and bosom, revealing them. She had also done something to her hair. Loosened it so that, still bright and lively, it flowed below her shoulders in youthful cascade.

It was the kind of entrance that in some intangible way always created a reflex in Sierra, causing her to rise immediately to depart.

"I must go."

"Good night, dear. Oh, you modern women, permitting our men to get into the habit of not escorting you home."

How often this little comedy had been played out. One didn't take Oliver away at this hour.

"I wouldn't even dare ask Sierra any more," said Oliver, not opening his eyes.

She would have liked that walk to Twenty-one East with him, through a late sharp evening. Perhaps then something could be recaptured that she had let slip. Or, was it to be never, never, never? She hated going home with that rhythm in her head.

"It's been nice, Leonore. I think Father is looking better, don't you?"

And still he did not rise. As if one could, under the pressure of the presence of Leonore. Oh, Oliver—shame.

"Yes, I do, Sierra," she replied, her eyes on the pallid face of Oliver.

Turning away to leave, Sierra knew that presently, where she had sat so inhibited, the warm, forgiving, magnetized hands of Leonore were going to hold and caress that hurting cheek.

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## CHAPTER XVI

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THE famous Sunday luncheons at Twenty-one East started, more or less accidentally, on what was to be their historic way. They dated back to one André Dijon, French playwright, who with two successful plays on Broadway, both of which had arrived by way of the Charlottenburg, once gave out an interview before sailing back to France.

Asked for three outstanding impressions of his first visit to America, he had enumerated: "The enthusiastic reception accorded my plays; a meeting with President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House, and Sunday luncheon in Twenty-one East with three of the most interesting women in New York, the mademoiselles Ames, Mullane and Baldwin."

"What caught him," observed Kitty, "was my Russian mustard, Charlottenburg's goddams and Sierra's impersonation of how-still-the-night."

"After permitting me to pay dinner checks and cab fares over a period of three months, he settles his account in an interview," said the Charlottenburg dryly. "About all we'll get out of it will be more Sunday deadheads."

But dating from that blustery December luncheon, noted by M. Dijon, these Sunday noondays became winter routine.

Almost immediately, another of these functions achieved fur-

ther publicity when a Miss Lucretia Bonsell of Richmond, Virginia, for whom the Charlottenburg was seeking publisher, refused to sit at table with a brown guest from Haiti.

The headline read: "Southern poetess refuses to dine with Haitian prince. Departs from home of her hostess, Miss Charlotte Ames, in huff. Hostess refuses to comment except to state luncheon proceeded uninterruptedly."

It was not entirely accident that the incident seemed to achieve a publisher for the poetess and a vaudeville engagement for the Haitian prince.

It also achieved the introduction into the household of Erna Henninger, daughter of the Charlottenburg's eldest sister, the widow of a building contractor in Wilmington, Delaware, who had left her with five small children, a gray frame dwelling in a rapidly deteriorating neighborhood, and life insurance that provided an income of two hundred dollars a year.

Erna, whose training in a commercial college had been manipulated free of charge by way of a state senator who had reason to feel kindly toward the Charlottenburg, was suddenly lifted out of the waiting list of a Wilmington stenographer-and-secretarial agency and inducted into Twenty-one East. A poor but proud relation, to be addressed by servants as "Miss," but whose duties in her aunt's household ranged from cutting radish rosettes for the Sunday luncheons to carbon copies of contracts, to dictation from Kitty, to plain sewing, to fourth hand at whist, to masseuse.

The idea of a secretary-of-all-work, who might be willing to come into Twenty-one East on a beginning basis of board, lodging and spending money, had been Kitty's. The idea of Erna had been the Charlottenburg's. At first the Charlottenburg's sister, Martha, even though long-time recipient of Charlottenburg largess, had demurred, but Erna, who knew her aunt but slightly, and then chiefly from afar, had turned her nearsighted eyes eagerly upon the opportunity.

"It's impossible for your mother to want anything that I suggest," the Charlottenburg had told Erna during their second interview upon the subject. "The mere fact that it comes from me will disqualify it. No use your mother and I meeting. We don't know what to talk about when we do. What's on her mind. Boy?"

"I think so. Rolfe. But he's not on mine."

"Well, make sure. All things being equal, marriage is best bet, but if this one isn't the bet ——"

"He isn't, Aunt."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Well then, if you can fix it with your mother—and if you can't, I will—you are welcome to come on to this job for board and keep and enough wage to send your mother half of it every week. Now go home and chew it over with her. She is the master chewer of all time. Whatever you decide between you, suits me."

In the end, never enlarging upon what had transpired at home, Erna had arrived, bag and baggage.

It became immediately her weekly task to typewrite a list that went out to all the daily newspapers, of the guests present at the Sunday luncheons. About one third of the time, according to the social, professional or sensational news value of the guests, they were published.

Flitting through these occasions, sitting at table when a last-minute cancellation caused problems, taking the guests' wraps, cutting stems of the flowers which Kitty never allowed anyone except herself to arrange, answering hurry calls from the limited kitchen force, Erna, lusterless as soot, moved through the background of the household.

But even as she faded into the vivid design of the life about her, as a pattern dims down softly into an old rug, she was able to boast to her sisters, all of whom were to marry and have large families, that she had observed at nose-to-nose range one or two of the major poets of her time, many minor ones, playwrights, socialists, stellar and not so stellar public men and women, the governors of Rhode Island and New York, a reigning pugilistic champion, a Negro educator, a Haitian prince, Evangeline Adams, Caruso, a prince of Luxembourg, a future President of the United States, and always a motley of the social and the near-social, the great, the near-great, the notorious and the obscure.

That Sunday that Colonel Haff (the title one of affection bestowed by his friends) came to luncheon, the sole guest, Erna

sent out no lists to the newspapers. The wealthy brewer did not make up a news item worthy of Twenty-one East.

As a matter of fact, however, this Sunday marked an occasion fraught with interest for the three of them. The fifty-nine-year-old city alderman and head of the immense brewery interests, Haff, Inc., had been following up his more or less recent acquaintance with the Charlottenburg with attentions of a marked sort.

Potted plants from the Haff conservatories, cases of famous Haff brews, hothouse, out-of-season fruits from the Haff Tarrytown estate, were daily occurrences. For weeks now, that air of excitement lent by arriving messengers and packages had hung over Twenty-one East.

By this time, the intimate persiflage indulged in by the three concerning the attentions of Haff to Charlottenburg began to take on the edge of caution. You didn't joke about the walrus mustache or the walrus table manners or what Kitty called the walrus blood of one who might ultimately become a member of the family. And it was rapidly becoming apparent that the advances of the industrialist-politician were not quite merely casual. Sallies at the expense of the Charlottenburg's "brewery-brummel," becoming more veiled and subdued, finally all but subsided.

Occasionally Kitty and Sierra paired off to exchange surreptitious and rather dumfounded observations:

"Can you imagine, Sierra! She's fallen head over heels! It doesn't make sense, because he's dodo from the word dough, but when sex rears its ugly head, tra la!"

"She not only likes him, but she likes the idea of his six children. She'll be superb in the role, too."

"If we girls will wait too long, Sierra, to have them ourselves, there are worse methods than marrying rich brewers with a brood of ready-made ones, although I confess I'd prefer them without the rich brewer."

"He's a decent sort, and it irons out so many things, including the Charlottenburg's carefully concealed but outrageous maternal instinct. But—a man like Haff attracting the Charlottenburg! Of all people!"

"Why, of all people? We're all sisters under our skin and a pretty thin skin at that. There isn't one of us—and I venture, oh, High Sierra, to include even you—who wouldn't throw all this



over tomorrow for a chance to go normal. Trouble is, the Charlottenburg has waited too long to make it easy. Dammit, so have we all. But she'll compromise on the second best."

"Haff is only ——"

"All right then, third best or eighth best. Haff a loaf, etc. Clever devil that she is, Charlottenburg will take her family ready-made, with a good provider and no illusions thrown in, and run the entire shebang by a twist of her smart hand."

"Yes, but ——"

"I know all the buts."

"She is just beginning to get by financially in a big way on her own, is twice the brain that he is, three times the personality, and —after all, Kitty, be realistic. Haff is fifty-odd, and odd in other ways."

"Them are stern biological facts you're sayin'! But I still think she wins if she loses. I hope she marries him and his six children and lets us come and visit her in the big old Staten Island family manse over Christmas, where they sit down eighteen or twenty to table. But only on condition that the young people don't call us 'aunty.' The hour hasn't struck when I'm ready to be that to other people's children."

"It will leave us to carry on alone, Kit."

"Two vestals where there were three. And the Honorable Haff is the sort who will want his woman in the home when he gets there nights. I don't know who or what the first wife was, but I can foretell his husband behavior by the shape of his cranium."

"We'll have to carry on, Kits."

"Yes, but not in the way you mean. What worries me, not to get materialistic, is how I am to afford to carry on, when it becomes a fifty-fifty basis?"

"But ——"

"But no, no, no, I have my pride, you know. My sense of *noblesse oblige* to the Mullanes of Kerry Patch. And when the Charlottenburg passes out of this picture, she passes. Within a fortnight she'll be sewing name tape in the panties of her boarding school step-twins, and have forgotten how to pronounce Europium. Percentages, dotted lines, will be something you let your hubby worry about, and Twenty-one East will have become the zany and last resort of a pair of leftovers. That's us!"

"It will be unthinkable without the Charlottenburg to aid and abet you in making Twenty-one East the lunatic asylum it is coming more and more to be."

"To say nothing of the fact that without her, the strain on my exchequer will rub me out of the picture completely."

"Nonsense, Kits. Don't talk that way. I'm ——"

"You know our iron and golden rule!"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"But I insist upon carrying my own share of the burden as I cross it. That is, unless your father should suddenly discern a little pot of gold for me hanging at the end of a Wall Street rainbow. It's strange how flexible my firm principles can become under such circumstances. Apply a little heat and Kitty's character will behave like butter under temperature."

"It's you who will be left with the weak sister, Kits. You'll have to do the actual carrying, brilliantly and alone, with me bringing up the rear as usual. Especially now that I am trying to beg, borrow or steal those four lots out of Father, for a site for Home House. There is nothing I want so much, Kits, as Home House. It's indecent the way I want Home House."

"Sierra, oh, high one, concerned with all those frustrated females with muddy skins and unfulfilled urges! Oh, Sierra, you won't ever desert your Kitty, even for them or for a rich brewer with ready-made offspring? Kitty's so lonesome, Kitty's so Godawful lonesome."

This luncheon for which Erna did not send out lists to the newspapers took place on a perfect Palm Sunday that had crept softly and suddenly upon a city still wearing its galoshes.

Spring flashed so unexpectedly, spilling such brightness over streets inured to drabness, that the shabbiness of weather-beaten façades and coal-smoked drapes sprang into high relief.

But not along the street of Twenty-one East. The result of a house-to-house canvass by Miss Mullane, uniform window boxes, bright with hyacinth and tulips, bloomed along the window sills of practically every dwelling on it.

Civic pride, Miss Mullane would have explained to you, lifted its shamefaced head in response to the importunings of one of the old-maid eccentrics of Twenty-one East. Those same im-

portunings also achieved quite a flare of newspaper publicity on this co-operative beautification of a New York residential street. Also, Kitty's firsthand acquaintance with the Widow Freiling of Twenty-seven East, whose brownstone house she was ultimately to redecorate from basement dining room to mansard roof, grew out of that house-to-house canvass in the name of Street Beautiful.

A fine whorl of daffodils, which had been carried in a sheaf of green tissue paper by Colonel Haff through the bright Palm Sunday morning, occupied the center of the luncheon table.

It was an adventure in agreeableness to lunch at Twenty-one East on a spring Sunday. Church chimes tilted out over the pleasantness. Green smells came up from the patch of back garden. An unseen clock remarked the passing of the half hours by playing a thin music-box aria from "Aïda."

The salad which Kitty mixed at table in a wooden bowl smacked of dandelion and faint garlic. The dressing which she concocted of Roquefort cheese and olive oil, whipped together in a dish of cracked ice, was voted by Haff, himself a gourmet of parts, to be to the queen's taste. Also, on a day that had turned suddenly balmy, you could trust Kitty to serve a candy-stripe, strawberry-and-mint ice cream, when originally she had planned apple cobbler and hard sauce.

The something that was to make every kind of occasion, however trivial, that had been touched by the hand of Kitty somewhat of a small adventure, hung over this dining-room scene.

Partaking of that scene, yet scarcely adding to it agreeable patter, something heavy lay upon Sierra.

So it was to this end! It was for this mess of pottage that the Charlottenburg, at the drop of the Haff hat, a pompous derby that sat rather ridiculously at angle to the shining bald pate, was eager to trade the yield of her years.

So the Charlottenburg's frequent reiteration that the conflict with a man's world was too bruising to justify the sacrifices had been serious! Even Haff was acceptable alternative. Haff, in his fat fifties, with grown children, and what was generally known to be a depleted fortune, apparently represented acceptable alternative to the role of unattached female, with the world her playground.

It might be right, certainly natural, even desirable, that the

Charlottenburg should relinquish her sovereignty over such transient interests as Europium dancing, itinerant authors, her passive but increasingly influential role in civic politics, American Indian pottery, and various current enterprises in collaboration with Kitty, which ranged from the manufacture of cold cream to the exploitation of North Carolina homespun.

But from Sierra's more personal angle, what of a world that did not include the Charlottenburg!

If it had to be, why not Kitty, who was as incongruous in her role of efficiency engineer of her own affairs, as a toy spaniel in a kennel of great Danes.

Or for that matter, why not herself! Time and time again, confronted by her settlement house classes of sooty-faced, deprived and miscellaneous youngsters, an imaginative orgy had possessed Sierra. Those children were born of her! Out of an immense fecundity she had brought forth those miracles of life! Those little sniffly, sooty faces before her became children of her womb, even when it had become almost too late for her to bear them!

But to lose the Charlottenburg to Haff would be irremedial. It would be like losing her to some other cause. She did not quite put into words, quite analyze, what cause. Certainly not from the cause of women out on their own, and scrambling for whatever compensations they could muster. Certainly not from the no man's land, midway between the home and the marts of men, where Kitty and the Charlottenburg matched their opportunists' wits.

The heavy laughter of the Charlottenburg, who was regaling the Colonel with an imitation of her recent interview with a Tammany politician on the subject of licensing the child actor, boomed across the table.

"By God," I said to him, 'you fellows better not take any walks around the monkey cage at the zoo. They'll think you've escaped.' "

"You're a card, Miss Ames. You've just got to let me bring my girl, Mary, around to one of these Sunday shindigs. She's the one I keep telling you about. Gives imitations of Mary Manner-ing, Rose Stahl, Julia Marlowe. You can't tell it from the real

thing, not that I know anything about it, but that's what those who do know tell me."

"We'll look her over," said the Charlottenburg, digging a spoonful of *port du salut* cheese out of its jar and leaning to place it on the plate of Colonel Haff. "Try that with a swallow of port, Haff. It hits the spot."

"She takes after her mother who had talent thataway. You'll see for yourself when I bring her around. Next Sunday suit you?"

Miss Mullane tilted her small, short-haired head.

"We're all dying to meet the family, Colonel. That seems next in order."

Unplumbed by the dark look flashed by Charlottenburg down the length of the table to Kitty, the Colonel washed down his *port du salut*.

"I've got six pieces of progeny to show, Miss Kitty. Not one of them is chipped or damaged. All fine as fine can be."

"The Charlottenburg is a perfectionist, Colonel."

"That, my dear Miss Hellion Mullane, will be about enough out of you," said the Charlottenburg, serving the Colonel sugar out of the bowl which she held poised. "There's no home in New York, Haff, where you'll get colored crystals instead of tombstones for your coffee. That's because ——"

"That's because, in case you don't already know about it," cried Kitty in the tone of la-dee-dee, "you're in the home of the most original woman in town, la Charlottenburg!"

"Famed chiefly, Haff, because she can stomach Kitty Mullane."

"And also because she discovered colored-crystal sugar and is going to make money out of it; knows what the public wants before the public wants it himself; can smell a mouse quicker than a cat; knows the way to a man's heart is through his stomach; but prefers the quicker and surer way through her brain."

"If there's one thing I admire more than another," said the Colonel, hitching his heavy body about on his frail chair until the rungs pulled, "it's a smart woman. What say, Miss Ames, if you and me take this afternoon off to try out that Willys Knight two-seater of mine. I've got a lot of ideas I'd like to talk out with a smart woman like you, if Miss Mullane and Miss Baldwin don't mind."

Stirring her colored sugar into her demitasse, Sierra's inner depression sank to a new low.

The Charlottenburg's season-around hat bore little relationship to her head. Of good quality black felt, with a slightly rolling brim, it sat incongruously upon her round head, as unrelated as a plate to a sphere.

Yet, placing it there while Haff awaited her in the lower hall, the Charlottenburg found herself actually turning to the mirror as she jabbed in the hatpins, something so unwonted that she turned away sharply, two spots of color like red paper circles on her cheeks.

Good God, what was coming over her! If Haff liked her, he was going to have to take her, fat, forty and as fair as she intended to make herself for any man. When you had a moon face, short neck and an indulged waistline, you built up a sort of defense. Early in her teens, first in sensitive anguish, then in despair and finally in bravado, she had begun to bulwark herself thus.

Goddammit, I'll change my state of mind instead of my state of body. Nature put one over on me. If this is God's idea of Charlotte, who am I to tamper with it? I'm fat and that's that, take it or leave it.

So, no concessions, not even to a spray of lace at the throat or hats of less stern stuff or a daub of powder across a face that shone as if scrubbed with soap and water, which it was. So, into the square-cut, well-tailored tweed jacket. A jerk at the tweed "rainy day" skirt and uncompromising shirtwaist, pigskin gloves, large utilitarian hand satchel, and, to her second flash of chagrin, a last glance into the mirror.

Good God, no fool like an old fool. But her spirits surged toward the sun. She wanted what she was getting and had never made any bones about wanting it.

The Colonel's shiny new Willys was proving to be a winged chariot that was to rush her away from being everything that she least wanted to be.

Twenty-one East, except for the fact that it contained Kitty and Sierra—and God knows they too needed what she was achieving—had begun, as the years passed, to take on something of the

aspects of a zoo, accomplishing what eminence it boasted at the cost of labeling its occupants as exhibitionists.

To be sure, they were no longer the special females they had been even five years before when a woman by venturing outside the orthodox roles of teaching or prescribed and circumscribed office work, literally threw herself to the cartoonists.

But the category of clever unattached females out of step, going new places on their wits, was one to leap from, joyously, into the role of wife to Haff and stepmother to his six. No regrets, except for the fellowship of Sierra and Kitty, which must be preserved. Certainly no regrets for the impersonal world of business, which, when a woman entered it, became so highly personal. Even after forty and fat had put forth their dual protection, the barriers which men erected against the woman-entrant into their workaday world persisted.

Dammit, a woman had to be three times as good as a man in order to get one-third as far. Dammit, the Charlottenburg was tired. Bone-tired. The Europium fad had yielded far beyond expectations. A half-dozen ventures, poking their heads through like crocuses of spring, were on their way. Adventurous, yes; precarious, yes; unstable, yes.

You get a woman on the rebound from such realizations, the Charlottenburg could have told Haff, and you get a woman whose fatigue of the spirit, frustration of the body, biology of the mind and organs, inclines her gratefully toward the kind of securities marriage has to offer.

Each heavy footstep she placed on the stairs that led down to the front hall where Colonel Haff awaited her was planted with purpose and excitement.

Haff's matter-of-factness was a source of pleasure to the Charlottenburg. After all, the two of them, spinning along in his bright Willys, with its sporty windshield the shape of an immense pair of spectacles, were in middle life and knew their way about.

Romance between a widower in his fifties, with six children and the scars of a life of ups and downs across his expression, and a well-along-in-years, heavy-legged virgin with a heavy voice and wise eyes, could be unludicrous if you kept your wits about you and steered in this sane fashion.

The open car sped alongside the Hudson River, the barricade of new apartment houses overlooking it falling behind presently. Next, the city's ragged edges, and then the open landscape, still wintry in design, but sun-flooded. The bland air blew gustily against the Charlottenburg's face, jerking her hat, which, guiltless of the winding veils which the women in the cars they passed wore bound about theirs, did not budge its anchorage.

The Colonel reached forward for a pocket in the blond upholstery.

"Here's goggles for you, Miss Charlotte. You'll get something in those sharp eyes of yours and we can't have that."

"Don't pamper me with goggles, Colonel. I don't need them any more than you do."

Dammit, whatever else they could say of her, "No fool like an old fool, perhaps," it could not be said, even by herself to herself, that she had stooped to one silly artifice of conquest. No middle-aged fat lady making herself ridiculous for her! Apparently the Colonel liked and admired her for it. Leaning back against his cushion, pulling on his invariable long cigar, he was obviously a man relaxed, entertained, content.

A stoutish lady and a stoutish gentleman, riding smoothly in their mutual state of quiet satisfactions. Few, if any, illusions, but a quiet courage to face realities. Maturity had its compensations! The girl, Charlotte Ames, who had slept with a cigarette picture of Nat Goodwin beneath her pillow, had found her stoutish Lothario too late to bear him children, but not too late to face with gusto and equilibrium those substitute compensations which both of them were having the good sense properly to evaluate.

In spite of her hand carefully on the throttle of her emotions, something as high as great expectations began to surge through the Charlottenburg, flushing her face, lighting her eye, and paradoxically endowing her with an unwonted restraint.

Could Haff, in his wildest dreams, conceive that the offer of marriage she was about to receive was her first! Not even Kitty, with whom, to a far greater degree than in the case of Sierra, she exchanged intimate confidences, knew that! She doubted if Sierra would even have been interested. Certainly not in the way Kitty



was. Avidly, with all of her curiosity, Kitty wanted to know of such matters.

Nor was the Charlottenburg without something more than interest concerning Sierra. Strange Sierra, in her area of self-created isolation. What underground rivers of her had never come to her placid impersonal surface? Somewhere in her woman experience she must surely have desired, or been desired.

Time and time again, she and Kitty had speculated concerning Sierra's almond-smooth serenity and high impersonal dedication of purpose. Was this surge of Sierra's toward those who hungered in mind and spirit and body anything other than her own maternal urgings, unrequited?

Deep down in her, Sierra was doubtless of the same flesh and frustration, the same desires and urgings of the womb, the mind, and spirit, that kept the embers of youth's compulsions glowing long after fecundity had passed.

The Colonel blew in, and the Colonel blew out, leaning to shove the smoke from before the Charlottenburg's face.

"Don't mind my smoke, do you?"

No subterfuge here. "I smoke 'em myself," she said. Just the same, she intended to quit, now.

"It's certainly a privilege, Miss Ames, to be thrown in the company of ladies like you. A smart woman outsmarts a smart man every time."

"But not so he can notice it," she observed, dryly.

"What say?"

Haff was going to be comfortable like that. You could count on his density.

"I'm not much concerned with outsmarting, Colonel, unless the cards happen to fall that way. I find it's a good enough world, if you don't try to take out of it any more than you put into it."

"You said it. My wife, God rest her soul, lived on that principle and raised her children on it. 'Do unto others,' was her way."

She liked that reference to his wife. Here was a man who would practice his husbandry as he practiced his churchliness, his politics, his social behavior. With conformity. Mediocre to tears, if you will, but of the stuff that made life secure. Unexciting,

perhaps, but also unharassed by the temperaments of those who had grown simply great, instead of great simply.

Haff had neither grandeur nor genius, but you could imagine awaking of a morning with your head on the pillow beside this man, and thanking your God that it was there instead of uneasily against the background of the unstable world that moved through the portals of Twenty-one East. Good God, talk about the cart before the horse, or the bed before the altar!

"I reckon you're wondering, Miss Charlotte, why a rough diamond like myself, with no qualifications that entitle him to the precious time of ladies like you, has put himself forward, after a manner of speaking."

Here it came!

"If you had to come in contact with as many rhinestones as I do, Colonel, you'd welcome the rough diamond."

"That's mighty fine of you, Miss Ames. My wife, God rest her soul, managed to put up with a good many years of this rough one. My kids manage to put up with it, too. But the time has come, now that they're getting old enough to wash behind their own ears, for me to give them something better than just the old homespun pappy."

Oh, how abundantly she would give those young ones the woman touch. She would give to them and to him. She would take over the Colonel himself and those pallid children of his in the group photograph which the Colonel carried in a wallet. Here was work to be done, and great cream-colored Christopher, by Step-mama Charlottenburg.

"Look here, Miss Ames, don't mind if I call you Charlottenburg, for short, do you?"

"Suits me through and through, Colonel."

"Well, Charlottenburg, I've done about all the beating around the bush that it's in my nature to do. Can a man do more than come to the point bluntly?"

"Is it blushing time, Colonel? We're too sensible for that at our time of life."

"I'm the one should do the blushing at what I'm about to ask. But if there's one thing I know better than the next, Charlottenburg, it's human nature. So when I took one look at you, I said: 'That's my woman!'"

"That's about the finest thing that's ever been said to me, Colonel."

"I mean it, Charlottenburg. You're a woman after my heart, head and guts, knowing you're the kind will excuse me for putting it that way."

"Heart, guts and head. I'll take that, Colonel, and let the other gals have the lace valentines, serenades and blushes."

"I mean it, every word, or I wouldn't be riding along here this afternoon, putting up to you the proposition I have in mind."

"We're both adult, Haff. Say what's on your mind and I can tell you in advance I'm going to be proud to hear it."

"Say, you're a card! Privilege to know you, and a privilege to put up to you what I intend to, even if you turn me down."

"Don't worry about that, Haff. We're neither of us babies in horse sense and we've reached the horse-sense time of life."

"Right you are, Miss Charlottenburg. No fool like an old fool. But I'm about to do something that's going to change the whole tenor of me life and I'm as excited as all get-out about it, even if it's the second time I've done this shenanigan, and I'm old enough to keep my shirt on. Don't mind going along with me on a bit of personal history, Miss Charlottenburg?"

"Tell as little or as much as you like, Haff. I'm not the kind of fool woman who wants to fool herself that a man's past before he met her was lived in a vacuum. Great cream-colored Christopher, neither was mine, for that matter."

"I understand that, Miss Charlottenburg, and appreciate it. Just the same, I'd like for you to have known the Missus. She was a plain woman, but solid gold. Good Irish stock, right out of North of Ireland, where I first saw daylight meself. After twenty-three years of right living with as fine an Irish lassie as God ever coined, a man gets the habit, Miss Charlottenburg. Six years of widowerhood is about all I can stomach. I figure the finest tribute I can pay the memory of Mary, the mother of my children, is to be satisfied with nothing short of another marriage, since she proved to me it is the best life. And so, Miss Ames ——"

"You're going to do it again. Horse sense."

"But leading up to that, Miss Charlottenburg, is where I get to you, and my presumptuousness in daring to approach a lady like you. I'm been telling you about my eighteen-year-old girl, Mary.

Sweet as a honey bun if I do say it. A dotting pa don't need to be in his dotage to be proud of her."

"She sounds like a grand young one, Haff, and if there's a way on God's earth to handle all six of them so they won't feel the shock, I'm going to find it."

"It's just Mary, out of all six, Miss Charlottenburg, who is a little of a problem. The other five are ordinary young ones, geared like their pap, to take things as they come. Mary's different. Mary's on the genius side, and that's where you come in, Miss Charlottenburg, if you'll pardon what may be presumptuousness."

"Sometimes a woman, Haff, can handle a high-spirited, sensitive girl a little better than the best of paps."

"That's exactly what's on my mind, Miss Charlottenburg. Mary is shying away like a spirited horse at the idea of her pap remarrying. Sensitive young one. Remembers her mother, God rest her soul, and feels ——"

"Most natural thing in the world. Needs handling, that's all. Feels nobody can take her place. And that's right. But the right person, who understands, can go a good way in making a home for them again. Mary needs what I've got to give her, Haff! Understanding!"

"Exactly. God love you, Miss Charlottenburg, that's why I want you to take Mary on. Money's no object in giving her what she wants, and what she wants (gad, I can't make her out) is a stage career, with all the fixings. There's been a good deal of controversy on this, between me and my girl. Haff stock isn't stage stock. But I've made up my mind now, seeing how I'm in for living what's left of my life my way, to do what I can toward seeing my children live theirs thataway. Right?"

"Er-right."

"I'll back my girl to a show that I hope you're going to produce for her. Money's going to be no object. I'm still a rich man and I figure if what I'm about to do is burning her the way it is, I'm going to make it up to her. Right?"

"Er-right."

"And what's more, I'm going to take care of you besides. There's a spot in our city machine, and one that will bowl you over when you hear it, that I want held down by the right

woman, and you're it! It's a plum that I'll be ready to tell you about before many moons, but meanwhile, we've got to clear up this matter of my Mary first."

"Yes."

"You see, all of a sudden—God knows I can't make it out—she's crazy to play Juliet in a big way. You know, Romeo and Juliet. The girl's talented, no doubt of that. I'll back her in that or any other show you pick for her; and between you and me, I don't care if it fails the next day. Call it conscience money, if you want. God knows I haven't always seen eye to eye with her on this business, but the way I've got the thing worked out now in my mind is, if I'm taking the right to live the rest of my life my way, she's got the same right. Now that's fair enough, ain't it?"

"It—sure—is ——"

"If the truth is known, I'd just as soon see her fail. That's why I'm willing for her to start on top with no underpinnings. Slick?"

"Slick."

"I want you to meet my little fiancée, too, Miss Charlotte. You're such opposites, you're sure to enjoy one another. She's the widow of Tim Balch. You remember him. Tammany Bill. Pitch didn't stick to her though, Miss Charlotte. She's forty-two and when it comes to innocence, could be a baby in her cradle. She don't measure up to you when it comes to brains perhaps, but she's a nugget of pure gold, and that's what matters, now ain't it? Right?"

"Right."

"She's the little-wife, home-loving sort. Wouldn't know a career if she met one on the street. Quiet as a mouse, pretty as a kitten. Baby's been widowed twice. I tell her, the fellows who had to die leaving her behind must have found it twice as hard to go as most. Ruby, is her name, but I call her 'Baby.' Lord, any man would. Guess that's my story, Miss Charlotte. Have I made myself clear? You need me, especially when you hear the political plum I've got up my sleeve for you. God knows I need you. Clear?"

"Clear as hell, Colonel."

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## CHAPTER XVII

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THERE were red edges to the pretty eyes of Mary Haff. Even the edges were pretty. Little rosy shadows, as if you had shaded off their tints with a crayon. Further evidence of storm across her springtime prettiness was a pair of trembling lips. It was the pain of one very young and very hurt. The Charlottenburg, who sat at her desk viewing this storm in spring, made gruff noises after the manner of a man clearing his throat.

"You're a bag of tricks, Mary Haff, and it's taken me this second interview with you to find it out! You don't want to act. You're like a girl who's in love with love, instead of with her fiancé."

"But I do, Miss Ames. You're just heckling me."

"No, I'm not. I'm siphoning the truth out of you. There's always been a little girl like you! The pretty-heart who played lead in the parochial school plays, and looked angelic in "Veronica's Veil." Mamas and papas have stewed over your aspirations for a good many generations, and mind you, I'm talking against my own best interests, because your dad is willing to stake me to a dream of my life to become producer on my own. And Shakespeare at that! I could play your pap for the sucker he is, but I'm afraid God would strike me dead and I want to stick around yet awhile."

"Miss Ames, you just want to make me cry."

"Hell, no! Dry those deft tears and listen to old pickle-puss me make sense. You're a pretty kid and you've got an itch. 'Tain't acting, Honey. But acting is just a way out of sticking by your paw when he brings a new female into the house, or else there is something rotten in Denmark I haven't been able to sleuth out."

"Why, Miss Ames, I want papa to marry his 'Baby,' if he wants her."

"Of course you do. And you're not taking advantage of his feeling of guilt and crying into your pillow every night so he can hear you through the wall, now are you?"

"I cry because ——"

"You cry because you're a corn-fed little number who sees a chance for some extra spoiling that is too good to lose. You don't really want to act, Mary, if you have to work for it. On a silver platter, yes; but forcing your pretty little talent with a papa-bought production is only going to make you laughingstock, and you're not going to sweat for what you want. In fact—and I wouldn't tell you this, Mary, if I didn't think you a nice brat at heart—I don't think you've got it in you even if you were willing to sweat for it."

"You're just being terrible to me, Miss Ames."

"At my own expense. I'm talking myself out of as big a plum as will come my way in many a day. But I'm telling you what your old man's been telling you all along, up to the time marriage got in his hair and he began to feel the need of dishing out conscience money."

"No, no, I want my father to be happy, Miss Ames, if he can be happy with that silly babified old thing. She's terrible, but he likes her. But that's all right! It's me! I want—I want ——"

"What do you want?"

"I—you see, Miss Ames, Father's so terribly hidebound, so—so terribly Catholic about things. In our church, you see—there are things we don't do, and—well, it's me—I want—I want ——"

Rising, the Charlottenburg walked to the window that overlooked the street, jerking back the curtain slightly.

"There's what you want, waiting for you across the street under his usual lamppost. Isn't it?"

"Miss Ames!"

"Yes, your old fat Aunt Sour Puss has enough of her faculties left to see him bring you to the door and then wait for you

while he smokes too many cigarettes and picks that particular little pimple under his right ear. See, there he is at it now—Mooncalf Number One, mooning for his Juliet.”

Suddenly Miss Haff began to cry, shattering tears that shook her to her frail spine; racking sobs that engulfed her so that the Charlottenburg scooped her into her arms as you would a child.

“Tell old Aunt Sour Puss what’s got you all confused. Has little naked boy ‘Love’ bitten my little girl?”

“You’re terrible! You’re terrible to me, Miss Charlottenburg.”

“Does papa know about little naked boy, ‘Love’?”

“Of course he doesn’t. First of all, Joe’s High Episcopalian and Father’s so against any of us marrying out of the faith. He’s just a darling boy, Miss Charlottenburg, who’s come up here from the South and—and ——”

“And what, Mary?”

“He’s night clerk at our corner drugstore while he’s trying to get on his feet. Father wouldn’t—Father wouldn’t—let—me—I—I daren’t even let him know—much less bring Joe home—oh—Miss Charlottenburg ——”

“Shh-h-h, child. Get quiet. I see. I see,” said the Charlottenburg, holding her frail burden as if it were an infant. “Hush. Hush. Let your fat friend think.”

“You’re right about the acting, Miss Charlottenburg. I like it. But nothing else really matters to me now that I’ve met Joe. But if I were to tell Father—a poor soda clerk and all—he—you don’t know Father when he’s roiled, Miss Charlottenburg. He sent my brother off to South America when he fell in love with the wrong kind of a girl. Not that Joe is the wrong kind of fellow, Miss Ames! He’s a steady fellow. He’s everything a girl could wish for, except the money part, and I just know I’m the kind of girl will never be able to fall in love with a fellow who has it in him to make money. Joe’s poetic, Miss Charlottenburg. He’s a dreamer. That’s why I got the idea for going into acting. To make money—so Joe and I—we ask so little. A tiny house of our own. I can’t come out straight and ask Father. He’d send me away—from Joe ——”

“You poor tormented youngster. What in God’s name has letting your father spend a fortune on this Juliet nonsense got to do with all this?”



"It's the only way I know to get the money, Miss Ames. Father wouldn't give it to Joe and me to start on."

"You mean to say you actually think there's going to be money for you out of this production of Shakespeare your father is mad enough to contemplate? Profit for you?"

"We don't need much, Miss Charlottenburg. Just enough to start. Joe would like a little business. A drugstore of his own. He's funny that way. A dreamy kind of fellow. Oh, Miss Charlottenburg, if I could just earn enough money to start Joe! If Father would only give me what it will cost him to launch this stage career for me. But he won't! If he were to find out about Joe in advance, he'd send me to Europe or some place far off, the way he did my brother. But he can't do that to me! I'll kill myself first—I'll kill myself first, Miss Ames—if Joe and—I——"

"Good God," said the Charlottenburg, continuing to rock her as if she were a babe. "Good God, so this is the mess of fish!"

"If you tell Father, Miss Charlottenburg, I—I'll kill myself!"

"No you won't, but just the same I won't tell. And now, you beautiful and dumb little nitwit, sit yourself on that chair and tell me how you have the impudence, while that narrow kid across the way stands there mooning under a lamppost for you, to let your father make a fool of himself and yourself on the strength of this cookie of a romance of yours!"

"It's not a cookie, Miss Charlottenburg! It's real. I've never really been in love before. I've realized that since the day I met Joe."

"Oh, so you've thought you've been there before?"

"Yes, but by contrast, I can see now how real this is. Joe is everything a girl could want, except the things my father puts above everything else. Joe's poor and a dreamer. I wouldn't dare bring him home. Father wouldn't understand what makes Joe tick. Anyway, he thinks it's a sin if a young boy and girl like myself look at one another. He doesn't realize I'm grown. That's what makes sin, Joe says—forbidden fruit."

"So Joe thinks if you let your father stake you to the show business——"

"You see, Miss Charlottenburg, Joe used to be in it himself, and he knows it's not easy, but Joe says——"

"Joe in show business?"

"Yes, a drummer boy in a trapeze troupe out in Australia where he was born. Joe is one of those boys who have dabbled in everything. I tell him that's why he is everything to me ——"

"I see."

"But you don't see, Miss Charlotte Ames. You're thinking things."

The Charlottenburg eyes swung down slowly full upon the small figure in its heap.

"And you are being things. Bad, sneaky, forbidden things."

"Joe and I are engaged."

"So. Little flirt meets drugstore squirt. Neither dry behind the ears. What do you expect me to do in all this, my dear? Help frame Father?"

"No, only help a girl to live her own life the way you and everybody here in this house lives theirs."

"You're darling, Mary Haff. You're rubber-stamped to be darling to men, just as some women are stamped not to be that. If I didn't see through you as if you were made of crystal, you'd be selling yourself and your young squirt to me the way you are going to sell yourself to every male you meet in the long and adventurous lifetime that stretches ahead of you."

"Don't make fun of me, Miss Charlottenburg!"

"I'm not making fun of you, child. If I'm making that of anybody, it's of the men you are going to finagle before you die."

"I ——"

"You've already been bad with Joe, haven't you?"

"I ——"

"You're not caught yet. But one of these days you stand a good chance to wake up one morning sick to your stomach and sick to your heart. What then?"

"You—mustn't—say—things—like—that——"

"No? Is that little Jo-Jo over there with his collar up and his hat down the stuff that is going to meet that situation when, not if, it comes?"

"Oh, oh, I don't know why I came. You hate me. You did from the moment you laid eyes on me."

"You baby brat, you. I don't hate you. If I only did, I'd let your fool-papa buy his girl, who walks off with all the parochial school elocution prizes, a fifty-thousand-dollar Broadway humiliation, and knock off aplenty for myself. And believe you me,

baby brat, your fat friend could suck up some loose change like a blotter, that's how dry she is for something that can be used as money."

"I love him so, Miss Charlottenburg."

"Pretty idiot. So will you love many more. And many more will love you. It's in your face and texture, to be loved by men. I know your kind with my instincts, and so do men."

"I wish I were dead, that's how you make me feel."

"So will you many times more, you wanted little female, you. But always with a little secret excitement of self-dramatization. Men will kiss your sweet eyes to soften your tearful and recurrent misery of wishing yourself dead. They'll clasp necklaces on your misery, and bracelets and rings. They'll kiss your misery to make it well time and time again. Wipe your eyes and answer your fat friend a question, or let me dry them for you as so many men are going to do before you die. How long since you were a virgin, child? Don't lie. Old Aunt Sour Puss knows all the answers. Never mind, we'll consider it already answered. How many before Jo-Jo were there?"

"Only two—but——"

"Mary, let me help you to be good! I'll do it tenderly as if you were my child. Need me, Mary. I need to be needed."

"Oh, I do, Miss Charlotte. I do, I do, I do. I want to be good. It's Papa who won't let me be good. He can't seem to understand that with us children life can't be all discipline and early hours and mass and the things he thinks are good for us. When a father stops remembering he was once young himself, then ——"

"I'll talk these matters over with your pap!"

"No, no, no. You know too much. No, no, no. If you do, I—I'll kill myself—he'll kill me ——"

"Listen, sweet hurt puss in a world of men who will always kiss your hurts. Listen, my dove, my cherry-pie, my woolly lamb, if I'm going to fix your life, you've got to shut up your bawling and let your fat friend mix her own dough. Now run along home."

"But ——"

"No ifs or buts. Trust me all the way or not at all. Bring your Jo-Jo the lamppost hugger over to Sunday lunch tomorrow. We'll look him over."

"But Joe isn't a lamppost-hugger—he ——"

"Of course he isn't. He's your virile Lothario on wheels! There will be another Lothario here tomorrow, by the way. A young doctor named Peck. Mind you, keep your pretty eyes off him!"

"Oh, Miss Charlottenburg—I just love you ——"

Late that evening, the Charlottenburg, over her knitting, remarked dryly to Sierra, "Mary Haff was here again today."

"Congratulations upon not being her stepmother."

"Her pap made that decision. I didn't."

"She's a sweet child, but you would have spent the remainder of your days being wrapped around her little finger."

"She's the answer, or I suppose her chemistry is the answer, to why she'll get free and handsome board and lodging all her lifetime, with pearls and little baby chinchillas thrown in, while the likes of us sit on our behinds and get patted on the head for our brains by the men who pay the bills of the Mary Haffs, who have what it takes."

"And what does it take?"

"Go ask Mary. If I knew, I wouldn't be here. Which reminds me. What's become of that nice clean young doctor whom you brought around last Sunday for lunch—the one who studied for the priesthood and then switched to medicine?"

"Martin Peck?"

"Has he raised money for his prenatal clinic yet?"

"No, but his dream will come through one of these days. His trial clinic at New House is attracting wide attention. Why do you ask?"

"Because I need him and I need him quick. Can you produce him for lunch tomorrow?"

"He's usually free on Sundays. Why?"

"Good. He and Mary Haff are going to be God's gift from heaven to each other, the endowment for his clinic thrown in by his future father-in-law, one Colonel Haff."

"Charlottenburg, it sounds right as rain! It's inspirational. As a fixer, you have no peer."

"—as a fixer for everyone, and anyone, just so it isn't old Sour Puss fat sock sitting here, fooling with other people's lives in order not to have time to think of her own."

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## CHAPTER XVIII

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EVERY Easter, Erna went home for two weeks. Invariably she did this at the urgent instance of the Charlottenburg.

"But, Aunt, I'd rather stay here. It depresses me to go home."

"Get along! You've a mother and a swarm of family in Wilmington. As it is, they are sure to say your louse of an aunt has alienated you."

"She has," replied Erna, with what amounted to a surprising spurt of briskness. "Alienated me from family wrangling and the smell of babies' didies and the sight of Mother's Mother Hubbard."

"Your mother would be Sloppy Sue if she had married Jay Gould. As a girl, her room always looked as if the last day of Pompeii had taken place right in the middle of it."

"Mother's so overworked."

"Tut, she's inefficient by nature. Her major inefficiency was marrying a blue-eyed Irishman with hollow legs in which to carry more alcohol than is given to the cubic content of most of us, including your corpulent aunt."

"I'd just as soon lie in a wooden box with a litter of pups as live the life Mother has. While he lived, Father never came near the woodbox to help with the litter."

"My child, your vocabulary shows the results of exposure to

your Rabelaisian environment. It's about time you returned to the maternal wooden box on Shane Street, Wilmington, and the remainder of the litter."

"I abhor Shane Street and all the rows of cooped-up lives in the rows of cooped-up houses."

"I'm not pretending that life in that packing case on a street with railroad tracks running through it, the litter swarming in too few rooms and your poor mother a rack of bones in a Mother Hubbard, is anybody's idea of the ultimate. But your mother wouldn't change places with me for my weight in gold, which is a king's ransom."

"My brother Tad shocked Mother to tears one night at supper by telling her she was God's gift to high birth-rate. Poor ma! Oh, Aunt, I don't want to go home for Easter. I'm sure to miss something exciting here."

"What's exciting? Three old birds whistling in the dark? Hoping about for dear life is no life! Take it from your old-maid aunt, if that young engineer back in Wilmington still means business, grab the invitation to be his missus with alacrity, and go live in a boxcar with him, or follow him on to a survey to the Moravian desert."

"Aunt! I'd rather spend a week-end with you and Sierra and Kitty than a lifetime with Rolfe Mason."

"There are worse destinies than being bored."

"What are they?"

"Imitating not being bored."

"I'd rather imitate not being bored."

"You marry Rolfe if he asks you, Erna. He's steady, decent and average and will give you a family that he will provide for somehow. If he doesn't ask you again, see that he does. For whom are you waiting?"

"Oh, for love, if you must know."

"M-m-m. Don't wait too long. He may stand you up. Compromise on steadiness, decency, and a fellow who will run in harness. You're not the kind to set the world on fire, girl, either with your beauty or your brain. Reach for the moon and you'll fall on your face."

"On my ugly face, is what you really mean."

"Great cream-colored Christopher, why can't the average

woman make the best of herself instead of bellyaching about God's part of the job."

"You know I'm hideous."

"All right then, I'm a beauty and don't get sick to my stomach every time I pass a mirror."

"But you're you! You're a personality, someone who does things. Not only in a big way, but secret generous things that the world never hears about. That's something to live for. What am I—a failure whose failure doesn't matter to anyone except myself, because I don't matter."

"You little fool, you! That's what I'm telling you. Begin to matter, and quick too, while you still have the chance."

"What chance?"

"As good as you're going to get! Go home for Easter, as I say. Sit yourself on your ma's front porch and figure things out. Who's the better off, you or your ma whom you regard with a pity she is entitled to throw back in your teeth?"

"But ——"

"Your maw may have the brains of a hare and look like a scarecrow dressed up in a Mother Hubbard, but she's mattered! She's lain with her man. She's held his head when he hic-coughed ——"

"Aunt, must you!"

"—and diapered her brood of kids, and kissed their nakedness when they were babies and cried out her heart over failures and poverty and worse."

"Chiefly worse!"

"Perhaps. But at that, she's got more to show for what she's done with her span of life than her fat bird of a sister, who has nothing to show for having lived her own life but her freedom. Tell your maw she can buy it from me, ten cents on the dollar."

"But, Aunt ——"

"Tssst, here come Sierra and Kitty. Three not-so-blessed virgins are about to draw up around an imitation family board, within the imitation sacred precincts of their imitation home."

Wilmington proved to be everything Erna had known and dreaded it would be. The clapboard house on the street with the railroad tracks was the gray of her mother's Mother Hubbard.

The family swarmed through the grayness. Moths in twilight. Moths in fog.

The five very young children of her youngest sister, who lived in the other half of the double dwelling, moved about between the two houses, constantly wanting in, wanting out.

They were nice tow-headed children, belonging to Maria, who had married a young Swede, Olaf Johnson, a foreman in the DuPont works. Maria, who had been the prettiest of the flock, now had taut lines in her face due to what she described as her constant "bearing-down" pains. She kept no help, but at three o'clock a neighborhood high-school girl came in and took charge of the children until dinner time. Sometimes Maria and Erna went marketing then. It was pleasant to get out of the atmosphere of the suds-and-food-smelling households, except that Maria and Erna had so little to say to one another.

In contrast to Twenty-one East, this world seemed as through a looking glass that had been breathed on. Dim, lusterless, unreal.

And yet, in a strange way, her mother seemed actually to thrive on her chronic discontent. And immersed in her world of diapers, Olaf's prospects and what she called her "female trouble," Maria was too intent upon circumstances passionately important to herself to work up sufficient curiosity to sustain polite interest where Erna's affairs were concerned.

And yet after the initial impact of the poverty-colored environment, certain easy adjustments took place in Erna. Following the first night, it seemed to her that she had never been away, and that her half of the bed, which she shared with her mother, had never been usurped by her younger sister, Lena, who had taken to the couch for the period of Erna's visit.

And how surprisingly good her mother's cooking! Strong forthright foods that brought to mind the Charlottenburg's indictment that Kitty's menus were more frequently designed to hit the eye rather than the spot.

The familiar boiled beef and cabbage with which the house in Wilmington habitually reeked faintly, slid past a grateful palate and set the gastric juices running.

Erna's one-time favorite dish, potato pancakes, as only her mother could prepare them, was frequently on the table in honor of her home-coming. Kitty had once served what promised to be



their counterpart, indescribably delicate flapjacks, scented in rum, and the Charlottenburg had ruthlessly remarked at table: "If these are crêpes Suzettes, give me my sister Martha's potato pancakes."

Erna would not have admitted it, but even her weak spine relaxed gratefully to the old carpet-upholstered patent rocker in the front room, as if its tiredness had not been really eased since the days of her home life.

It gave her a vague sense of wanting to cry to be back in this querulous environment that was born of poverty and monotony. In color and texture it suggested the gray wrapper which the spare body of her mother inhabited from morning until night. About its edges clung children, invariably children, querulous, demanding or laughing, in a manner so adorable to Erna's mother that she could recall her constantly wiping her hands of dishwater or laundry suds in order to pick up a baby and mash soft kisses against its smiles or tears. She was a fierce, thin, female woman, whose wrapper had been originally designed to soften the habitual bulge of her many pregnancies and as diametrically opposed to her sister Charlotte as if one or the other of them had been changed in the cradle. It would more probably have been Charlotte rather than this more Ames-like mother of Erna, who, except for a marriage which her family considered "beneath her," had toed with conformity.

A rabid, a predatory kind of curiosity concerning Charlotte inhabited Erna's mother. Married, out of the home, and having babies by her impecunious Irishman while the Charlottenburg was still in pigtails, their sisterly paths had always been divergent. As children, disparity in years had separated them. In later life, disparity in general.

And yet there hung in the mind and memories of Martha almost an obsession of interest where the Charlottenburg was concerned. Every aspect of the few exchanges of visits that had taken place between the two sisters remained etched against the older woman's mind. Her last visit to her sister had been back in the days of the old apartment on Seventeenth Street. Martha and her handsome Irishman, then well along the downroad of his inebriacy, had sat on the edge of their chairs, like blowable bits in the path of a gale. The gale of the Charlottenburg. As children, Martha and

her years-younger sister Charlotte had infrequently met. As adults, they probably never should have.

But how there did linger in the carping memory of Erna's mother the memory of those visits! Lingered, and, as Martha came firmly to believe, set in motion vibrations that one day were to impel the Charlottenburg to write her impecunious sister in Wilmington suggesting that she send one of the girls, preferably the one she was helping finance through commercial school, on to New York for a position in her own household.

This inordinate curiosity on the part of her parent concerning every aspect of the Charlottenburg's existence contributed considerably to Erna's dread of these home-comings. Her blue eyes feverish-looking, the erstwhile Martha Ames would lay aside any of the demands of her role as seamstress to the good families of the town in order to feast her emaciated soul on crumbs from her daughter's experience in the world of the Charlottenburg.

The best method by which to irk her temperamentally undiscursive daughter into disclosures, Martha had long since learned, was by the well-worn psychological processes of negation.

Seated in the shabby room dominated by sewing machine and dressmaker's dummy, she would begin her subtle bombardment, while Erna, who helped with the sewing while at home, stitched or pedaled.

"Charlotte must certainly live beyond her means. And that Kitty person is even more extravagant."

True to her parent's prognosis, Erna, goaded, would launch into explanation or rebuttal.

"That's where you're wrong, Mother. They are as clever in earning capacity as they are in every other way."

"Easy enough, with a rich girl like Sierra Baldwin to fall back on in case of emergency."

"That's where you're wrong again. Sierra has her own private fortune, but she aims to spend it all on her hotel and her girls."

"I suppose she's taken you into her very private confidence to tell you that!"

"I know more of Sierra Baldwin's private affairs than anyone in Twenty-one East, if anyone should ask you."

She did not go on to explain the avid absorption with which she ransacked through papers, letters and documents belonging to

all three of the occupants of Twenty-one East, or to what extent she was familiar with matters she could not have come by in any other way.

"A woman in Sierra Baldwin's position doesn't need to scrimp along with two friends who resort to all sorts of shenanigans to make a living. She's the one I can't make out. When Charlotte was only nine, she was already a shenanigan child. I'll never forget the time she sold Father's wedding suit to an old-clothes man for eighty cents. The whaling she got! Even back there she had a talent for picking rich friends."

"Sierra Baldwin may be the richest of the three, but she's also the simplest of the three."

"As simple as diamonds and caviar and sable, I guess."

"I've never even seen a gold ring or a fur tippet on Sierra Baldwin, and you can ransack her dresser drawers and closets and not find as many frills as you would in a nun's!"

"You'll do the ransacking all right," observed her mother, recalling the years of the futile disciplining of this trait in her eldest.

"I'm confidential secretary."

"Oh, so she takes you into her private confidence."

"I'll wager I know more of her affairs than anyone in Twenty-one East, if anyone should ask you."

"I'm sure you do," observed her mother dryly. "I say again, I can't figure out the crowd of them."

"Sierra Baldwin is spending her money for the good of others. She's pure idealist."

"I wonder if that isn't about all there is pure about that whole setup in Twenty-one East."

"Mother, I won't have you talk so!"

"I'm sorry, daughter. I suppose I wouldn't have you there if I really thought that. People are mean."

"Oh, but they are! Why even the laundress we got the other day to help Ellen, tried to quiz me about the 'queer females' she had come to work for. Did I get her fired!"

"I hate even having you know what such things mean."

"You can't live in Twenty-one East and not know. Even the postman winked at me the other day when he handed me a registered letter for the Charlottenburg and said, 'Sign for Mr. Ames."

I mean Miss Ames! What the dickens do I mean? Which is it?' What he meant was something so low-down I pretended I didn't understand."

"I don't know as I do exactly either, Erna. Charlotte was always a tomboy and as she grew up seemed sort of on the mannish side, but nobody thought anything much about that. I believe Mother and Father knew even less than I do about—such things. Whatever else Charlotte may sometimes seem to be, she's a fine, wholesome person—not—whatever this other awfulness is."

"Of course she isn't! That's what makes me so insane, Mum, about what goes on behind their backs. People are rotten. People gossip about things that don't exist. I live in the house with them. Nothing goes on there that couldn't go on right here in this house. It's sickening, that's what it is. Sickening!"

"But daughter, there is something strange about three women, one of them so fluffy, the other two so sort of—er—a—manly ——"

"There you go, being like all the rest. Horrid-minded! Horrid-mindedness, that's what it is. Dirty-mindedness."

"Daughter!"

"I'm sorry. But you just can't talk about those three and their morals in the petty little sense a lot of the hens in this town do around their kaffee klatches. Twenty-one East is simply on a different level of human experience."

Martha bit off her thread with front teeth that gritted.

"I see."

"But you don't. You're just being—hateful about three of the most wonderful and exciting ——"

"I know. The most amusing, high-spirited ——"

"Yes, and everything else I can think of."

"Except what every normal healthy-minded girl should think of. My advice to you is to come to your senses. Marry Rolfe."

"There we are back on that again! You blow hot one moment, and cold the other, Mum. You know yourself, you don't really want me to marry Rolfe."

"I don't know. Really, Erna, I don't know. I admit I keep hoping something in the way of a better opportunity will come along in New York. I say again, life with Rolfe won't release you from the kind of thing you've been born into. It will seal you

down into it. But even at that, he's a boy who will be steady and ——"

"I wouldn't care if he could cover Wilmington with gold leaf, I couldn't be in love with him."

"Naturally, I had hoped you would meet up with something better in New York, Erna, but that isn't saying Rolfe isn't a fine steady fellow. It's poverty I've such a fear of, although a smart young engineer can go places. I married for love, and see what poverty has done. Your sisters married for love, and poverty is at their marriages like moths after velvet ——"

"Life with Rolfe will suck me down to no better, Mums. Perhaps he's not as improvident as Father was, but he's a small-life fellow at heart. It's in his cards."

"But Erna, so are you a small-life girl with ideas that are going to spoil you for it and get you nowhere in a larger life. You've had your try at it. Your Aunt Charlotte isn't going to put herself out for just ordinary you. You're a cog in her machine."

"Of course I am. I'm not a personality. Never will be. I'm one of those background girls with stringy hair who wears glasses and ——"

"Well then, Erna," said her mother, with a note of concession in her voice that fell like lead upon her daughter, "take Rolfe. Have babies. Be smart enough not to have too many. Set up in a boxcar with him, if necessary. But don't get left at both ends. Theirs and yours. Even in a marriage with a fellow like Rolfe, you may win. The other way, you surely lose."

"I don't—want to—lose ——"

"Of course you don't, daughter. God knows I don't want you to. In a way, I guess you would say that I lost all the way along my road. True, your father made a mess of things. But when the door closed on the outside world at night and we were left alone with our children—and yes, even our troubles—there he was! That's the moment, Erna, when the lonely heart faces its worst. When the door closes on the last guest ——"

"I've heard that before from sources that would surprise you. No, Ma, there's nothing you can tell me about certain kinds of lonesomeness that I don't already know about."

"Your father's gone now, and I'm here—alone. But I've had him, and I've got my children. No, daughter, I didn't lose. I may

sit here and envy a lot that Charlotte has and does and is. Her independence. The position she has made for herself. The freedom to come and go. But look at me sitting here, a rickety old seamstress in a rickety old house. I wouldn't swap! Rolfe is a bird in the hand, Erna, clean and God-fearing. Women without husbands go through life playing 'Thimble, thimble, who has the thimble.' "

"Some women really prefer not to be married. I think Aunt Charlotte does."

"I doubt if ever in Sharley's life a man has asked her."

"I'd rather be married than not. I really would, Mom, except ——"

"Marry Rolfe, daughter."

"I suppose—so—and yet—and yet ——"

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## CHAPTER XIX

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**E**VEN more than the Charlottenburg or Kitty, who had their periods of frank skepticism, Miss Gertrude Blakesley, who had seen a dream of her own come true in Weatherby Settlement, which she headed, realized the driving purpose that animated Sierra toward her realization of Home House.

Sierra could talk to Kitty about her plan of a semi-private bath to every two rooms, and to the Charlottenburg on the minimum rate at which these rooms could be rented to the woman wage earner. But it was Gertrude Blakesley, who midstream had shifted her own career from teaching domestic science at Pratt Institute to social work, who really shared the dream of Home House from its inception in the heart and mind of Sierra to its ultimate realization in five stories of brick and mortar, bathrooms, electric lights, central heating, recreation rooms, gymnasiums, lobbies, and dining rooms, on West Twenty-third Street.

Neither to Gertrude Blakesley nor to Sierra was Home House just the pile of brick and mortar which had cost years of dedication to money-raising, mortgages, blueprints, estimates, delay, disappointment, legal engineering, architectural and ordinance headaches. It was stuff of dreams come true! A paradise for working women who had come out of the dark limbo of slum and tenement. It was a vision that collided sharply here and there with the

orthodox social worker's formulae. But passion for Sierra's sometimes impractical dream of a working woman's arcadia had been kindled in Gertrude Blakesley from the hour that Sierra, who had conducted classes in Weatherby House, had laid the dimly formulated dream before her.

Together they had plunged more deeply into the jungle of the dream of Home House. Together they had placed the initial idea before John Baldwin, interviewed bankers, negotiated money-raising projects, learned the involvements of bond-floating, pored over blueprints, specifications, charts and costs. Together their hopes had risen, fallen, hovered midway, collapsed, risen, soared.

Fifteen years Sierra's senior, practiced in organization, in executive philanthropy, Gertrude Blakesley knew every inch of the precipitous climb toward the realization of such a project as Home House.

Matriarchy of a sort had descended upon her far back when a young domestic-science graduate of Pratt Institute, had barged brilliantly from the dietary department of Weatherby House into its executive chair. Before the erstwhile dietician was forty, the staff, the personnel, all of vast Weatherby House, resolved about this shrewd and inspired combination of humanitarian, business man, executive and virgin mother-of-men.

Slum men, women, children, unemployed and unemployable, worshiped her; boards of directors respected her and wrote large donations because to be off the list of those privileged to contribute to Weatherby House was a subtle and dangerous kind of ostracism.

A gentlewoman with baby-fine gray hair, parted and drawn softly away from a high-boned face, guided singlehanded, and that hand a pale and quiet one, the destinies of the city's most efficient clearing house of human miseries, which, under her regime, had tripled its scope.

Square miles of slum area now radiated into Weatherby House, of which Gertrude Blakesley was the spinning center. A house staff of twenty-six sat down to table, which she dominated in a speaking voice that strained the ears of even those nearest her. A board of trustees, freighted with social and financial prestige, sat with muted power before the stranger power of the gentle-voiced daughter of a New England Presbyterian minister.



Out of this board of trustees, Gertrude Blakesley, with far more resources at her beck and call, than the daughter of John Baldwin could have commanded, had managed to raise more than half the sum needed to match Sierra's initial gift of two-thirds of her personal fortune.

Following a gift trip with Elsie Tweed to Louisville for the Kentucky Derby, Kitty had returned with a guarantee of eight thousand five hundred dollars from Elsie's eldest brother, Rowland Pretorious, international sportsman, who had won ten times that sum when his filly, Sweetheart, had captured the sweepstakes.

The Charlottenburg, by way of three benefit performances of professional talent brilliantly rallied, had matched it, but it remained for Gertrude Blakesley, whom Kitty had once labeled "a virgin by preference and no choice," to achieve the financing of Home House.

To Gertrude Blakesley, who had climbed the Jacobean ladder of tenement stairs for twenty years, here was a dream worthy of pushing to reality. Home House! Conceivably, this one might prove the first of a nationwide series of them, wherever the wage-earning women of congested cities or industrial towns were confronted with the problems of slits of rooms and slits of lives, in dark lodging houses or tenements.

A twelvemonth of long evening conferences at Twenty-one East had not been without vigorous opinion from the Charlottenburg.

"Great cream-colored Christopher, stop pampering the masses! The moment you give them their privileges, they'll begin abusing them precisely the way privileges are now being abused by the classes."

"But you don't——"

"Don't tell me I don't understand. I understand enough to know that if you don't make these transitions in living standards gradually, the bathtubs will be used as coal bins and the immemorial bedbug will crawl you out of house and Home House. Twenty-five bathrooms to every fifty rooms! What these girls you are going to house in elegance are used to, one generation back, is the privy and the washtub for Saturday night ablutions. As a matter of fact, we ourselves haven't been bathing in porcelain

very long. Reduce your building and operating costs by reducing your number of bathrooms. Stop pampering the pants off women who, if they had homes of their own, would be washing diapers and kitchen floors."

"God, I wish I could care passionately about the fallen arches of wage earners and their rising vocational diseases," Kitty had confided to the Charlottenburg one evening after Gertrude Blakesley's departure. "I do care, of course; but dammit, I can't help feeling much more interested in Kitty Mullane than in the social and economical and spiritual destinies of girls who make artificial flowers and boys' caps for a living."

"You have no cosmic urge."

"Perhaps not, but I do itch horribly if I see a deprived brat. Really itch, if you get what I mean."

"You're the sort of itcher who gets what she itches for. I'm glad to see you itch for a better break for brats."

"I do care, Sharley, about a lot of things you wouldn't think me capable of."

"Strangely enough, I believe you do."

"But answer me this one, Sharley *mia*. Why need the benefactors of the human race go about their errands of mercy in those awful ground-gripper shoes?"

"The ground-gripper school has its place."

"What will you bet me that the long, long trail to eternal ~~chastity~~ <sup>charity</sup> has been worn down chiefly by good women in common-sense heels?"

The day was to come, in less than a decade, too, when the pressed-brick structure on West Twenty-third Street, with its exposed plumbing, zigzagging frontal fire escapes, wooden floors, tin tubs, rope-manipulated elevators, gas jets and papered walls, was to be overshadowed by a superseding annex of steel, concrete and plate glass.

But the laying of the cornerstone of the original Home House, one bitterly cold March morning, before a small shivering group consisting of Sierra, Gertrude Blakesley, the architects, two of the building contractors, Erna, Oliver, Leonore, John Baldwin, and a handful of reporters, was never to surpass itself in the mind of its creator, Miss Baldwin.

Her memories of the brief invocation, delivered by Gertrude Blakesley's aged father, the small ceremony of the laying of the stone, even her own few words, haltingly and almost inaudibly spoken, were to remain a cornerstone in Sierra's experience.

"I know now," remarked the Charlottenburg at the buffet luncheon subsequently served to the chilled group at Twenty-one East, "what they mean in novels when they speak of 'transfigured countenances.' They were worn this morning at the dedicatory exercises of Home House by the Misses Baldwin and Blakesley."

"I wonder," remarked Kitty, rocking her hot punch and inhaling it as if it were brandy, "if those young reporters scented the real news of this morning's exercises."

"Your presence?"

"No, Charlottenburg, a still greater female phenomenon."

"Yourself?"

"Wrong again, sweet reptile. The female phenomenon of a woman as dedicated to the idea of homes for all women as a bride is to the idea of her own little cottage is news!"

Oliver raised a casual eye to Kitty, who had poked a pillow beneath his head.

"There is also a great deal to be said for the cottage—preferably one with rambler roses and a wicket gate."

"A great deal, Oliver," said Sierra, looking amusedly down into his eyes, "and most of it has already been said and said and said."

"Just the same," persisted Oliver, "poets have slighted the world-mother. School teachers who grow old in service are mothers without the glory. Florence Nightingale was one. Sierra and Blakesley are. If God had seen his way clear to grant me an iota of talent, I would write the saga of the thwarted world-mother."

"What about the stepmother, Oliver?" bantered Leonore.

"Let's have done with this baby talk," cried the Charlottenburg, lighting herself one of her cigars. "You know damned well any world-mother—whatever that means—worth her salt would change places with 'bungalow-mother.' Yes, and probably do more by the human race, in the long run, by way of wiping the noses of her twins than she would by concerning herself theoretically with tenement noses en masse. Due respect to present company."

"Well, well," exclaimed Sierra, with mock briskness, "back at the old barnacled discussion, aren't we? I'm not at all sure I would stand up under the test, if someone like Oliver came along and asked me to swap Home House for a semiattached house on Suburbia Street. Are you, Gertrude?"

The pale lips of Miss Blakesley smiled straightly. They were somehow the lips of one who had tasted something bland as tapioca, and smacked them gently. They were the lips of one who could be fond of tapioca.

"To save the face of my sense of humor, I must subscribe. But after all, for every swarm of women with the bungalow urge, comes one like our High Sierra."

Leonore, seated beside her stepson, let her fingers drift, from the arm of his couch, lightly upon his hair.

"You would hate a bungalow, Oliver. The plumbing makes noises."

"So does it in my room. The stationary washstand gargles."

"Refer all such complaints to the stepmother department. It will be attended to tomorrow."

John Baldwin, who had been reading a newspaper, flopped himself out of his chair.

"Let's go," he said, his face as dour as nausea.

Her impeccable sweetness on instant call, Leonore rose with her husband.

"Is the old back aching, dear? Don't return to the office this afternoon. Let's call it a Home House holiday!"

He did not reply, but walked toward the door, his arms hanging long and loose from their sockets.

"What say, J. B.?" called Oliver from his recumbent position.

With what seemed his consistent determination never to meet his wife's stepson eye to eye, Baldwin replied doggedly: "I want those 64's on my desk before three o'clock, and have those vouchers ready for Briggs when he gets back to the office."

Oliver, casting a look of comic despair in the direction of his stepmother, climbed staggeringly to his long legs.

"If I had my way, the cornerstone laying of Home House would rate a national holiday."

"An afternoon among the 64's, whatever they are, is better for you, Oliver," said Leonore, belying it with her eyes as, along

with Kitty and Sierra, she followed the men to the lower hall.

"John dear, why don't you let Oliver go alone to the office then, and you stay here with us girls and call it a day."

"Better the other way around, I should say," grumbled Baldwin. "I'm no holiday hound."

"Well, go along then. Since I can't coddle you on an off-afternoon at home, I shall probably attend my weekly circle this afternoon and help make layettes for the babies of naughty girls who are going to have them illegitimately. Oh, I shouldn't have put it that way, should I, Sierra?"

"And why not, Leonore?"

"Because it's not modern social service vernacular. Girls don't sin any more. They are just victims of society. Never naughty."

Sierra regarded her father's wife through eyes in which the serenity had not stirred.

"I'm sorry, Sierra. But you're so unteasable that I keep on trying."

"Well, daughter," said John Baldwin, settling on his derby hat, "I can't say that I know what it's all been about. But it's your money and if you and the suckers you got to go into it with you think those females are going to be any the better for the soft beds you provide for them, then you can outsmart your old pap."

"I can never do that, Father. But just the same, this has been my day, in capital letters."

"And it's your money that's buying the beds. I only hope the heads that lie on them won't be as soft as the beds."

"It's not just beds for heads, Father."

"I never laid mine on anything but a straw pillow until I was old enough to be your father."

"Now, Johnny," said Leonore, moving him gently toward the door, "we won't go into the good old days of open fireplaces and cold backs. Good-by, Oliver. Your ole lady will be standing a lamp in the window this night, to speed your return to the cottage by subway."

The last glance of the "ole lady," as she stood slim and not yet gray, the circling stairway of the hall of Twenty-one East her background, was for her stepson.

Hat, gloves and cane in hand, he bowed with the slightly mock-

ing quality that characterized him in the presence of the husband of his stepmother.

Following these departures, Erna, in spectacles and her black workaday frock with its neat white accents, moved softly toward the fireplace of the Charlottenburg's office-living room and started crackling noises by placing a fresh log.

"Stop doing pussyfoot things!" said the Charlottenburg, as she smoked and knitted. "I hate women with soft sedative gestures that stem from their immemorial instinct to lull the male. If Kitty and Sierra, to say nothing of Leonore, who wins the pillow marathon, were to place end on end the cushions they have placed behind the head of Billy alone, they would reach from here to the male paradise, which, I'll wager, doesn't boast a cushion or an ash tray."

"Who is Billy?" inquired Miss Blakesley.

"That's Aunt Charlottenburg's nickname for Oliver Plow," volunteered Erna, applying the poker.

"'Nickname for Oliver,' my hind foot. 'Billy' is short for my pet name for him, which is 'Liability.' A bit on the labored side, I admit, Gertrude? It also pains my niece, I believe, but she's in a delicate mental condition these days."

"Oh, Aunt ——"

"My kith and kin, Gertrude, is about to eschew marriage, as they say it in elegant parlance. Erna has decided, Gertrude, that she chooses to drop her young man because she prefers the strange life of Twenty-one East to diapers and domesticity on a civil engineer's salary."

"Oh, Aunt Charlottenburg, how can you! Miss Blakesley, life's not quite that simple ——"

"No, unfortunately," said Miss Blakesley, drawing on her gloves, "life seldom is so neatly diagrammed when it comes to making choices. Except for practical visionaries like Sierra."

"Who doesn't know what she wants any more than our confused Erna," sang out Sierra, re-entering the room.

"But who has a single-track mind," pursued Gertrude Blakesley, "which reaches its destination because it doesn't jump astride an impulse and ride it off in three directions at once."

"If Erna is smart, which she isn't, she will stop this damned

nonsense of chasing one whim after another and concentrate on the iron whim of the female of the species, which is having babies."

"Aunt!"

"Aunt, what? If you don't believe what happens to ladies who deny themselves or are denied the iron whim, look at your old Aunt Sour Puss and her colleagues in frustration. Am I right, girls?"

"You bet the Colossus is right," cried Kitty, entering. "Follow the iron whim, Erna. Marry your young man with no face in particular, and have your own life in particular."

"But, Kitty, Aunt is trying to tell me ——"

"To grab your man! Marry him. Go live in a boxcar with him or you're doomed to a cell of frustration in Home House or Twenty-one East."

"The Colossus is right, Erna," went on Kitty. "Look at poor me, who would marry the iceman, only he's afraid of me. Marry and have babies, Erna. Lots of them to hang onto your skirts and wave from the boxcar when the Oriental Express flashes past your siding. Have geraniums in tin cans on your window sills and rompers and your husband's long-legged underdrawers on the wash line. Let Miss Sierra Baldwin worry her handsome head about soft beds for the solitary females of Home House. You go to your own bed, with a mate on one-half of it, and a roof you can call your own, even if it's a boxcar's."

"Yes, fine, and all the time I'll be making babies in a boxcar, Aunt, you will be living the adventure of being you, Kitty will be dazzling up each day with excitements, and Sierra will be putting the roof onto her dream. Anybody can have babies in a boxcar ——"

"Yes, it does seem easier to have them there than on Fifth Avenue."

Suddenly Erna sent up a little flare, the way lighted newspaper has its brief flash and roar in the fireplace.

"You think that that's all I'm good for, don't you? Having babies in a boxcar! Maybe you're right! But for God's sake stop shoving me into that boxcar."

Clasping her hands over her heavy lenses, Erna dashed from

the room, leaving a silence into which the Charlottenburg spoke with a sniff:

"There's this to be said about going to hell in a hack or in a boxcar. It's one way of getting there."

Rolfe was coming for dinner. Fumbling at the sash of a blue-silk, square-necked frock which Kitty had originally inherited from Elsie Pretorious-Tweed and then decided it would make over nicely for Erna, waves of apprehension swept Erna.

The blue of the frock enhanced the blue of her eyes, and the cut of neck served to minimize the bony structure of a chest covered with stretched-looking flesh that was not creamy. It was her first dinner dress and it proved what Kitty described as the hopeless hiatus between Erna's narrow body of too few curves and a gown that on another, might have been lovely.

But the total effort, if meager, was not too bad. The eyes were very blue. The waistline trim. The set of her huge pompadour, backed by a flat blue moire bow, had that quality which makes the turning of the head of even a homely woman something pretty in a female way.

Rolfe to dinner had been the Charlottenburg's suggestion.

"Bring him around before you decide to go to hell in a hack. We'll help you make up your mind. But I can tell you now, from even the passing glimpses I've had, I'm for him, unless he has developed rickets or a harelip in the interim."

"You aren't, really. You simply think I'm no better than my opportunity. But it's lovely of you, Aunt, to ask him to dinner. Of course he'll come."

It was a Monday evening dinner and there were no guests except the pathetic Anastasia Walsh, known, not unludicrously, as the "magnesia heiress." This pallid and epileptic daughter of Ramses Walsh, had recently become, by way of her father's second marriage, the stepdaughter of a woman whose collection of scarabs and emeralds had long been world-famous.

Kitty's quick-witted patronage of the unfortunate Anastasia moved the new Mrs. Walsh, whose dread of her stepdaughter's cataleptic trances amounted to a degree of horror which she strove to keep secret from her husband, virtually to place her precious-stone collection under the curacy of Kitty.



It had been one matter to face, with determination, this problem of Anastasia, which the magnesia industrialist had put squarely up to the new Mrs. Walsh before their marriage. It had become another to live under the roof with it. The relief which Kitty brought to the state of nervous horror that was threatening to have its way with the bride of Ramses Walsh was incalculable.

To be sure, days could pass without the unfortunate Anastasia slipping over into one of her cataleptic interludes. But then again they would strike in rapid, sometimes daily, succession, scaring the wits out of her stepmother, who, as she confided to Kitty, had agreed in a prenuptial pact to keep this daughter of a previous marriage a member of the household.

When these strange visitations descended, the trained nurse in plain clothes who was Anastasia's constant attendant, calmly instructed those present to ignore the livid, dead-eyed kind of trance into which Miss Walsh would pass, and from which she would slowly emerge, seemingly normal and not conscious of the interim.

These periods, when they occurred at Twenty-one East, calmly flowed, under Kitty's guidance, over the fearful dilemma of Miss Anastasia, and when finally, five, ten, twenty minutes later, her hands unclenched and her rigid eyes moved back into their orbits, conversation included her once more, as casually as possible.

You could count on Kitty, to whom these cataleptic interludes were such a shock that she herself invariably suffered subsequent attacks of nervous indigestion, gracefully to induct the luckless Anastasia back into the conversation. Even Sierra, schooled as she was, dreaded these visitations of Anastasia, while the Charlottenburg openly declared that subjecting the poor girl to social intercourse, and likewise subjecting social intercourse to Anastasia, was mutual injustice.

Completing her procedure of assembling herself in her first dinner gown, Erna kept wishing that she could dispense with her glasses and that poor Anastasia were not going to be present at dinner. By now, Erna was genuinely sorry she had ever complied with the Charlottenburg's suggestion that she invite Rolfe. Their weekly habit of dining together at a little red-wine table

d'hôte restaurant in Greenwich Village on Rolfe's free day to come over from Tenafly, New Jersey, where he was now on a bridge project, had sufficed very nicely.

Even though she had prepared him, it was scarcely probable that Rolfe, doubtless trembling in his boots already, and lank and wrong in his new and too-blue suit, had any idea of the quality of what awaited him in this house, the like of which the boy from Wilmington had never dreamed, much less beheld.

And yet something perverse and almost cruel in Erna wanted to see for herself the unadjustability of Rolfe to this environment. It would serve to show up what she felt so sure was going to be his relationship, or lack of it, to everything she wanted or needed for her sustenance of mind and spirit.

Life in this kind of world would be no more fitted to Rolfe than she would be fitted to the life of a surveying engineer's wife in the Arizona desert country where his next assignment was taking him.

He arrived while she was still applying a last dab of "prepared chalk" across the bony box of her chest. It was the first time she had ever worn it exposed, and she began to experience in concrete form the devastating chagrin of a woman with a homely bosom.

Sure enough, here as anywhere, Rolfe remained true to his nondescript self. She might have known, she told herself upon seeing him at table, that there was nothing to test out that would not further reveal his store-cheese texture. To have thus produced him for scrutiny was to force him unnecessarily to italicize one mediocrity in the act of being attracted to another mediocrity.

Pallid as paste, Rolfe looked the color of what life with him would be. Children by him would be cast in the same paste. Days with him would move by to the swill of greasy dishwater, the wringing out of wet wash, the undesired sharing of his bed. It seemed to Erna that the odor of the life she would share with Rolfe, rose off him as he sat there against Kitty's Sheraton mahogany chair. Suds. Crib bedding. Boiled dinners. The odors of her childhood. The odors of her mother's life. The odors of her future —

She had been maneuvered into this exhibition by the Char-

lottenburg. Something of all this, Rolfe, seated squirming in his new bright-blue store suit, must have sensed, because as they waited in the Charlottenburg's living room before dinner he kept peering out into the hallway, starting at the opening or closing of every door.

"Sure nobody is coming except the ones you told me?" he asked twice.

"Nobody, Rolfe, unless the Charlottenburg drags in her latest enthusiasm, Filippine of Vienna. The doors to this house are always opening and closing. Messengers, packages, excitements."

Doors in life with Rolfe would open and close to the butcher's boy, doctor, huckster, gas-meter reader, insurance agent, bill collector. One dreary door in particular, the bedroom door, would open to Rolfe, to the pale smell of him, the lifeless wrists of him, the narrow back of him, the long thin feet and bony ankles over which the socks wrinkled. The very contemplation felt nauseous, as if it were something tepid to drink.

As a matter of fact, had Rolfe's intentions toward her, back in the Wilmington days, crystallized all the way, her acceptance of him would almost surely have been a matter of uncomplex expediency. Certainly now, several years later, bespectacled, given to violent periodic headaches that stemmed from a female complaint, nothing had happened to Erna's personal life to enhance her desirability. Nevertheless, here she sat, on the Récamier strip of somewhat foolish sofa which Kitty had presented to the Charlottenburg at Christmas, completely alienated from the Erna who, five years before, would in all likelihood have married her Rolfe.

The sofa was scarcely becoming to Erna. The bones of her knees, knobby as her neck, shoved through the blue silk.

"Typical Mullane," the Charlottenburg had commented, the Christmas Eve this sofa had arrived. "It fits my legs about as well as Kit's mauve gloves would fit my hands. Her Christmas present to me is, as always, really a bit of background for herself. She's one of those gals who loves herself on the horizontal."

"You look pretty, Erna," Rolfe remarked, as he observed Erna seated on that sofa. Actually, had she realized it, his pallid quality, which so irked her, matched her own.

"We won't let on about our thinking about being engaged,

Rolfe," she replied, as they sat waiting for the dinner group to assemble.

"Gosh, no!"

She hated his easy acquiescence as much as she would have disliked his eagerness to pronounce their troth. Wishy-washy. Namby-pamby. He was as lacking in initiative as the three of this household were brilliantly endowed with it. Pallor lay over the prospect of life with him, and over the immediate prospect of dinner with him.

It would have been another matter if only Rolfe had been a fellow of whom you could be proud, or who had something in the way of mental gloss to show up before these women. But Rolfe! Why, with one snort, the Charlottenburg could blow his house down. With one whiff of the elusive perfume of her personality, Kitty could befuddle him.

But once at table, the Charlottenburg seemed scarcely conscious of him one way or another. As a matter of fact, her annihilation of him was neither more nor less than that of the average visitor to Twenty-one East.

Her domination happened immediately and completely, dousing most of the personalities about her like a candle extinguisher clapping down on its flame.

Sure enough, her current enthusiasm, a young Austrian trade-named Filippe, who was agitating Paris with the super-nonsense of his plastic dressmaking, was present and helped to distract her attention away from Erna and her conquest. You sat for your Filippe gowns, as you sat for your portrait, posing in his *atelier* where he built his models and gowns in clay before proceeding to fabrics and feathers.

Just as the vogue for Filippe plastic gowns was breezing into Paris, and just as the phrase "plastic gowns" was beginning to find its way to American lips, the Charlottenburg's long-distance negotiations had been consummated with the soprano-voiced young man who three short years before had been clerk in a Vienna draper's shop under his real name, Hans Stangel.

Shop talk ran high, although Filippe, speaking no English, and apparently impervious to the Charlottenburg's German or French, was the picture of oblivion to everything except a de-

licious specialty of Twenty-one East known as "Bouillabaisse Kitty."

Nevertheless obliteration of Rolfe was so complete that, once they were seated, Erna herself, caught up in the zestful gale of Charlottenburg, almost forgot to be self-conscious of her Rolfe.

Talk and enthusiasm regarding the young Austrian as he dined with avidity, oblivion and impeccable concentration, engulfed but did not penetrate him.

"Watch Filippe put a ring through the nose of the women of America and lead them to plastic dressmaking."

"Nose rings by Mullane! Not to intrude myself."

"I'm going to lease the old Sibley mansion off Thirty-eighth Street and teach them how to pronounce *atelier*," boomed the Charlottenburg in her own abominable accent. "I'll put the phrase 'plastic dressmaking' on their lips and they'll lick it."

The crinkling together of Kitty's eyes under excitement, a mannerism familiar and delightful to Erna, began to happen.

"Charlottenburg," she cried, "I've just the man for you! Keep your costs down and your prices up by using domestic materials. Wait until your Filippe sees the jerseys those Carolina mountain weavers I was telling you about, produce. Soft and perfect for dyeing and draping. My three-hundred-and-fifty-pound beau, Ike Schlossman, who knows more dye secrets than any German in the industry, is your man! And Charlottenburg, jeweled medallions for draped gowns! I've an idea for cabochons in old gold that will give Filippe an acute attack of turning-cartwheels-of-ecstasy over Kitty Mullane—erstwhile of Kerry Patch —".

"Let me more than get him to America before you begin re-making his gowns and destiny. It's the goddam little female minds I have to begin to plow up and under before we snip into our first yard of plastic."

A flood of beet red rushed down Rolfe's face into his tall stiff collar.

The goddam little prude moved in a phrase across Erna's mind, who then felt herself coloring up at her first use of profanity, spoken or unspoken.

"You can't meet the female mind on the level. You have to find methods as goddam indirect as the female mind itself."

"Never mind, you'll find them, Charlottenburg. Female psychology is about ——"

"—as clear as mud."

"Never mind. Under our expert touch, Charlottenburg, female psychology is about to be played upon as if it were a harp."

"*'Our touch.'* How do you get that premature, Miss Mullane?"

"You mean you aren't letting me in on this plastic swindle?"

"You know perfectly well," spoke in Sierra, "that the two of you are already as good as plowing under the female state of mind of the forty-eight states of the Union, undermining traditions in fashion from Bangor to Seattle, and filling your coffers with the result of this mighty revolution."

"Quite an all-embracing and attractive idea," remarked the Charlottenburg, moving her short black cigar back and forth before the fascinated gaze of Rolfe.

Kitty turned her bright and merciless eyes upon him.

"My corpulent friend, young man, wants to be embraced."

For the first time the Charlottenburg swung her gaze full upon the reddening Rolfe.

"My corrosive and corroding friend, Rolfe, would rather be female than bright."

Erna leaned toward the bewildered fellow, as if to cover his confusion with hers.

"You mustn't take Aunt and Miss Mullane seriously, Rolfe. They're like that."

"I see," said Rolfe.

So confusing were these overpowering ladies, swapping jargon which he understood no better than the food-absorbed Filippé, that his eyeballs felt like hot marbles in his head. These terrific ladies were like engines with headlights plowing out lanes of light in some equally terrific night. He felt as if he were running before them. Running and running. Presently he would fall flat on his belly. The wheels over him would be almost relief. Erna should not have brought him here!

All this, to say nothing of the fact that, true to Erna's warning of a certain possible contingency, the pale and silent lady seated between Kitty and the plain-clothes nurse had gone off quietly into one of her trances, sitting frozen into it like someone at the

waxworks. The sweat felt slippery beneath his collar and on the insides of his hands.

Appurtenances, or rather lack of them, worried him. The absence of tablecloth, spots of doily taking its place, the salt in little silver swans, the spectacle of a lady dining in gloves, of another smoking a cigar, of a third engulfed in a trance, confused him to such an extent that his fingers fumbled among the eccentric intricacies of Kitty's table service. So did the immensely heavy Bohemian water tumblers, with lips as thick as the coffee cups in a quick-lunch room worry him, and the pansy faces floating in his finger bowl, which he had failed to remove from his dessert plate until Erna, in unease equal to his, had reached over and lifted it away.

Erna's pallid vocabulary had ill prepared him for the freakishness of all this. Nothing except the pedestrian presence of Erna herself had replica in his experience, certainly not the lady in her trance, or the dark silent one who looked like a nun, or, for that matter, anything or anybody he was encountering in this fantastic excursion into Twenty-one East.

The talk itself meant nothing. When Erna said to him, "You see," and he replied, "I see," what both of them knew was that he did not see at all.

But Erna did. She saw now that with the best of intentions, the Charlottenburg could not even focus her passing interest upon his neutral presence, thus symbolizing what existence in general with him would need to be like.

More than that, following this Monday evening dinner, the Charlottenburg, Kitty and Sierra were never for years to refer to him again. Not through any conspiracy of thought or deed. It was merely as if he had passed through their experience in a manner too nondescript to retain identity. As nondescript as these three unpredictable women were vigorous. Written in terms of listlessness across the face of the man who had come to lift her out of this lively environment into the limbo of millions of low-budgeted women with too many babies and falling of the womb, was her future with Rolfe.

It was not a difficult decision for Erna, and yet it was a decisive dinner.

She did not see Rolfe again before his departure for Arizona, although a few years later, something reminiscent happened.

From the window of a train on which she was traveling with the Charlottenburg, who was on the trail of a young American Indian, in Las Vegas, said to have a bass voice of heroic proportions, Erna caught sight of someone who reminded her of Rolfe as they flashed past an intersection of road and railway track.

It was in flat, wheatland Kansas. A bell was clanging beneath a "Stop Look and Listen" sign at a crossroads, and a Fordful of pale-haired, -eyed and -faced family, waiting for the train to pass, gave her what seemed to be the flash of Rolfe at the wheel. There was a woman, who might have been herself, at his side, and a rear seatful of children, squirming and crawling like worms among themselves, their gray, dry-wash panties showing as they piled up on one another.

It was only a flash, and the man who might have been Rolfe was not Rolfe, but he was the color of Kansas dust; the woman, who might have been herself, the color of tiredness. Background: The hot monotonous land, wooden farmhouses and the beautiful rhythm of the moving wheat.

Only a flash, as what she was tore past what she might have been.



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## CHAPTER XX

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JOHN BALDWIN had limped off to bed, followed as usual by Leonore, who would return to the living room after her impeccable ceremony of attendance upon her husband. She would return, trailing chiffon, and the gas-burning chandelier, which Baldwin liked lighted full blast, would be turned off, and twin lamps with china globes painted in roses would spread pinkish glow.

Baldwin was conservative in this matter of light. He still preferred gas to the incandescent glare which was so rapidly superseding it and which his eyes found tiring. The house in Murray Hill had never been wired for electricity. Boxes of matches and lighters were profusely about.

Left in the living room, beside a window open to the first mild evening of a reluctant spring, Sierra swung her eyes away from the soft darkness without, and let them rest on Oliver, sprawled in his state of perpetual relaxation upon his favorite divan, for which Kitty had embroidered the sofa pillow.

"It's strange how this old barn of a house has always been able to achieve its own kind of quiet right here in the heart of the town, even since Altman's department store and office buildings have begun to crowd it in," Sierra remarked, after the footsteps of her father and her father's wife had receded down the carpeted halls.

He did not reply, but lay regarding her between slits of eyes.

"You do something like that yourself," he replied, after the silence had lengthened.

The hands in the gray lap of her mannishly-tailored skirt never fluttered nor made motions between themselves. They were utterly quiet hands, square at the finger tips, the nails pared straight, the white ruching at the cuffs of her gray cashmere shirtwaist enhancing their placidity.

The contemplative hand and the contemplative face matched in color and texture. They matched in quietness. They were part of the deep repose that kept Oliver too immersed in the pervading tranquillity of her, to stir.

"I remember as a child," she went on, "I used to come to this window a great deal because it looked out on the side yard and the plane tree. By turning my back to this room—it was gilt, red velvet and tassels in those days—I could feel quiet. I like to feel quiet."

"Those days—weren't quiet, were they?"

"No; as you know, my mother was not quiet."

He did not reply.

"I remember surprisingly, and I suppose mercifully, little of the—the horror part. My sister and I were so young, you see. Except the noise. I remember that."

He lay motionless. She liked it.

"I suppose I should be—afraid—mother's kind of sickness is sometimes hereditary. That is—you see—we could never be sure whether her—er—illness was the result of her accident or whether—she would have gone the way she did—anyway."

"M—m—m."

"Not that I'm afraid. I wouldn't even fear for children if I had them. My sister, Florence, used to be afraid. But since she's living in New Zealand, she writes that she is too peaceful to fear."

"M—m—m."

"No, I'm not afraid. Perhaps though, some subconscious fear of what I might inherit has schooled me to make myself feel quiet."

"Perhaps."

"Father's never mentioned anything on this subject, but almost the only preachment he ever made to my sister or me as children was on the importance of inner peace and quiet."

He could honestly have said of himself, as he lay there, washed in cool spring air, that for the first time he thought of her body. Her legs. Her thighs. Her bosom. It came over him, with some surprise, that her body was not quite as old as his. That its lines and limbs were long, and probably ivory smooth, its luster high, like the backs of her hands and the surfaces of her cheeks. Realization of her feminine texture pricked him slightly. So slightly that when she turned her head and the controlled lines of her face toward him, it was gone again.

"Why do you choose to live with a pair of women who are anything but quiet?" he asked, still indolently. "They are a couple of engines that must always be chugging away about something or other."

"In a way I'm a chugger too, Oliver. I chug my way along doing things that I hope are worth chugging for. We have to do something during this strange interlude between birth and death, and it may as well be something that seems to matter."

"What matters to you, Sierra?"

She sat so motionless, profile from him, that she might have been carved there.

Quite a woman, he marveled mildly, and found himself speculating, and as usual, in terms of himself. What did she think of him? As her father's glorified office boy, which he was? As Leonore's Pekingese dog, which he was? As a man who dreaded impotence of every sort too much to dare test himself out? Which he was. Was it possible that she was still a virgin? Yes, it was, and he found himself slightly revolted at the thought. And what was more, Sierra married, in her lover's arms, or mother of children, was one of those women who would remain a virgin, from whom, Oliver would have told you, deliver him.

And yet, it seemed to him, regarding her through the two-thirds lowered eyelids, that it would be possible, with a mite of self-propelling, to covet Sierra. There was about her a lambent energy that suggested a high-power engine in the roundhouse; an unmated she bear, at rest. She might transfuse him with an experience he had never yet had with a woman. A strength to feed his own deficiencies. A power to overcome his powerlessness. A potency to offset his lack of it. Quite apart from her status as daughter of John Baldwin; quite apart from that, had

he dared—but he did not dare. She was as high as snow peaks, which it was not in him to scale.

These women, like Sierra and those pals of hers, were not the ladies who wanted the vote and who in days gone by had gone to jail for whatever it was the suffering cats went to jail for. These three were the kind of gals who—who had missed the boat-train.

Well, in any event, he knew his place where the step-daughter of his stepmother was concerned. It was easy enough to remain there. But it would also have been easy, had he dared, to move out of it toward this placid creature.

She had not answered his query and he repeated it.

"What matters to me?" she asked, after another interval. "What matters to me?" She leaned forward, her breath flowing fast. "Oliver—Oliver—Oliver"—almost beyond her control was her urgency to add, "You matter to me, Oliver—you matter to me."

Leonore re-entered the room then, her drapery moving to her motion like water parting before the bow of a ship.

"Well, well, well," she said, something brisk and dismissing in both voice and manner. It was as if she were saying: "Now that's done and this hour belongs to me."

Whoever found himself thus impinging upon Leonore's late hour with her stepson moved for departure automatically, impelled by that indefinable something in her manner which demanded her right to the privacy of those coveted periods.

Immediately Sierra rose, a tall fir tree of a woman, the alone quality of a fir pervading her.

Sweetened by the knowledge that the guest was immediately departing, words flowed evenly from Leonore.

"Oliver will take you home, dear?"

"Most certainly not."

"You modern women!" he said, in the mechanical tone of the mechanical remonstrance he employed each time this situation presented itself.

That he said no more, nor pretended Leonore would countenance his going, Sierra liked. She would have liked too, his insistence.

"Let us know how your project for the ladies' hotel, or what-

ever it is, progresses," went on Leonore, with her dismissal brightness, "you wonderful cosmic-urge person, you! Come regularly, dear; your visits do worlds for your father. Love to the big and the little Amazons you live with. Oliver, slam the door after Sierra. It catches."

After the slam, for which she waited, Leonore walked over to her stepson when he re-entered the room, running her fingers lightly through his hair as he resumed his horizontal on the couch.

"Strangely right she should be named Sierra. She's like the very top of a mountain, isn't she?"

"One that's too high and too cold to scale."

"It's nicer down here among the little dandelions like me, isn't it, Ollie?"

He did not answer.

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## CHAPTER XXI

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DESPITE the fact that the new, two-hundred-fifty-room, two-hundred-fifty-bath Annex to Home House boasted finer exposure and cross ventilation than the old building, and that three rooms of the Annex had been especially designed to supplant her older quarters, Sierra preferred to continue on in her small office in the original structure.

Designed back in the days when she had planned to devote a morning or two a week as her time budget to Home House, she had long since outgrown the limited space of the older quarters. Steel filing cabinets crowded the walls, a secretary's desk was screened off by more steel files, and the tiny adjoining ante or waiting room, was also crowded to overflow.

The architects' plans for both the old and the new building adorned its walls, and the small trowel which had broken ground for both of them was mounted in a glass case, while crowded on every surface such addenda of household operation as samples of crockery, stacks of mimeographed menus, odds and ends of infinite assortment, contributed to the overcrowded litter.

Jammed into these older quarters, Sierra now spent the days of her week, and almost as many evenings, before the flat-topped desk which Kitty and the Charlottenburg had presented to her ten years before.

Into the homely timbers of the walls of this office were recorded the comedies and tragedies of the procession of women with whom, over the decade, she had come into daily contact; love affairs, family—money—business, health problems, psychological dilemmas, in varieties unending. Life currents eddied about these little old rooms in the old building as if they were tides, lapping but somehow not wetting Sierra.

On those occasions when fatigue hung from her shoulders and hips it did seem to Sierra that five hundred women, their lives, their concerns, their problems, their needs, their welfare, their morals and morale, their teeth, their bearing-down pains, their chastity, or lack of it, their wages, their sins, their industrial, economic, mental and sex welfare, were crowding her, back to the wall.

She had not planned this kind of Home House domination. In fact, Marian Dickens, Gertrude Blakesley's step-sister, one-time dean of women in a Middle Western college, had come to Home House a twelvemonth before, to take over in a general way.

But early it became obvious that Miss Dickens, both by equipment and circumstance, was to take over, and efficiently, only the physical well-being of Home House. Its sheets, its winter potatoes, waiting lists, leaks, telephone system, laundry soap, fire insurance, ash trays and house keys, were at her finger tips.

The perfection of her semiannual reports to the Board was Miss Dickens' singlehanded achievements. Every statistic of Home House could roll off her tongue to the decimal point. Without being able to identify one in ten of the residents by name, Miss Dickens could quote you the number of women who had found occupancy in Home House over any given year, the bed-linen replacement over any given year, the ash-receiver replacement over any given year, the *per capita* cost of meals served over any given year, and the *per capita* annual deficit (so valiantly reduced by now) over any given year.

But the saturating tides that flowed their way into Sierra's office had to do with aspects of Home House of which Miss Dickens knew little, if anything.

The five hundred wage-earning women, between the ages of eighteen and fifty, were as lacking in personal identities to Miss

Dickens as the five hundred beds whose sheets and pillow cases she knew by count.

Thus, long before she became fully aware of it, the one-man tribunal of Sierra Baldwin had been set up and her sovereignty over the five hundred women of the shifting population of Home House established.

By now, when she walked into Home House, it was as if the vibration of her presence shuddered through its mortar. Doors along corridors opened, women in various stages of dishabille dressed themselves hastily and hurried toward elevators to descend to her office, where others already awaited.

To the high altar of Sierra, day by day, evening by evening, year by year, came a steady procession: foreladies, sales ladies, stenographers, teachers, receptionists, piece workers, filing clerks, seamstresses, to lay before her the assorted confidences of their assorted lives. Confidences as assorted as their fingerprints, and yet based on mere variations of love and hate, frustration and desire, ambition, defeat, sex, loneliness, psychology and physiology.

Women corroded with loneliness, unwed girls in fear of pregnancy, spinsters facing the quagmire of change of life. Oversexed, undersexed, betrayed and betraying women, all in review before the curiously detached head of Home House.

These case histories were not filed away in the steel cabinets along with more impersonal Home House records. They were stored in the cabinet of Sierra's memory. Seldom did she fail to remember them by name and occupation, even when they returned years afterward. Case history after case history after case history:

Irene Polini, clubfoot  
Gerta Diefenbach, kleptomania  
Lizzie Cronin, menopause  
Mary O'Connel, hallucinations  
Irene Machter, tuberculosis  
Eliza Gibbons, unwed pregnancy  
Sofia Szold, suicidal mania  
Maria Poppola, theft  
Isa Kantor, persecution complex  
Clara Brown, alcoholic  
Bebe Ibbetson, Lesbian



Berta Crooks, Lesbian  
Lucy Smith, theft  
Celia Castriani, drug addict

Case history after case history after case history.

Processions of half-frozen lives. Wage-earning women mostly, for whom existence had lost, or never had, luster. Some so frozen that the flesh of the spirit had mortified. Scores of women, many of them older than Sierra, hung or rather clung around what had come to be the shrine of her small ugly offices.

Matriarchy at forty, insidious, unaggressive but defined, had crept upon the ungrayed head and strong uncurved body of Sierra.

Testimonies to it crowded the tall steel files:

Dear Miss Baldwin: [this from Sofia Szold, who had finally surrendered to her compulsion] I am going. Please forgive me for doing it at Home House but I can be surer here. Cyanide will not be messy. Like in the case of so many others here, you have kept me alive more than food could have. But even that, dearest and best one, was not enough. He—and he alone could have kept me. But I go loving him and you, dear dear —

There was this scrap of brown butcher's paper:

Dear Miss Baldwin, When you find my body it will be dead and full of love for you. There will be a baby in it.

Amy

Tramp, tramp, tramp, the passing procession of the women of Home House! Their tears, their laughter, their woes, their joys, had become the motif of Sierra's days. Weeping women, joyous ones, hopeful and suicidal. Women gone groggy with monotony, women afraid of love, afraid of lack of it. Women, women, women, pressed into the years, through them.

The intangible something that lay caul-like across Sierra's face as she sat in her office, clearing her desk before descending to the dining room for the tenth anniversary dinner, was the result of those years. She, who had never been other than full of years and quiet, was ten years older and ten years quieter.

There had already been official cognizance of this anniversary event that late afternoon, by way of a reception, attended by a

majority of the board of trustees, directors, patrons, donors, and friends of Home House. There had been appropriate addresses from two senior members of the board, a halting few words from both Sierra and Miss Dickens, a round of weak sherry punch, a news photograph or two.

But it remained for informal dinner with the women of Home House and the personnel of the staff, to climax this day, one decade removed from that penetratingly cold one when a chilled little group had shivered before the first-turned spade that had broken soil for Home House.

The fleets of small tables had been removed from the dining room and long narrow banquet ones substituted. There was no raised dais, but flanking Sierra at a head table were Gertrude Blakesley, Miss Dickens, most of the trustees, house officers, librarian, house doctor, gymnasium instructors, recreation hostesses, cashier, and practically the sole outsiders, Kitty and the Charlottenburg.

When Sierra, her plain waist accenting her plain tailored-looking head, entered the dining room it was already milling with several hundred women in search of their places at table.

Yet even in the din and action of waitresses pushing about, chairs scraping, dishes clattering, her entrance had the usual effect of turning the hundreds of faces toward her as if they were one.

"Dammit," cracked down the Charlottenburg, "it's not healthy. It's postwar decadence."

"Except that this began before the war."

"It's goddamned unhealthy for five hundred women to hand out the gaff that way."

"That is doubtless what they say about us," retorted Kitty, in her most even tones. "That also set in before the war, but in a postwar world, we're branded."

"You're being obnoxious."

"Well, aren't you intimating ——"

"Intimating, my hind foot! I say, and I've said to Sierra, that it's not healthy for an army of women to go maudlin with adoration the way they do here at Home House the instant Sierra enters it. Such goings on aren't healthy if they are aimed at anyone this side of God."

"That's stuff and nonsense. You're smitten with her yourself.

Always have been. Thank God I'm only mortal clay in your eyes. Nothing to live up to."

"Well, at least I was giving her my share of admiration before Home House was ever heard of."

"This is scarcely the time to go into all this, my martinet. I wish, though, it were in me to care, as Sierra cares, about their aches, their southern exposure, their female frustrations and bathrooms. Look at that one sitting over there in the corner, licking Sierra with her eyes. Look at her waist, will you! No income bracket is sufficiently low to warrant that shade of pink. She picked that color of her own volition. How she can bear to wear it against her sallowness, without getting sick to her stomach, is beyond me."

"Your asides are much harder to hear than the bilious lady in pink is to behold."

"I wish Sierra wouldn't always put us at this head table among her staff of the serious-minded and the sex-starved."

"I can swallow them easier than this succotash in canary-bird bathtubs."

"She's wonderful! Look how she walks through that sticky mess of women without letting one of them stick."

"I could do with a wee-stilled voice from you, my kitten."

With the exception of the war years which the three of them had spent in canteen and ambulance service in France, and the winter the Charlottenburg had embarked upon what proved to be an unprofitable Winter Palace venture at Lake Placid, Kitty and the Charlottenburg had attended all of these anniversaries.

Here was Sierra's dream hive, a vigorous ten-year-old reality, buzzing with accents out of middle eastern and southern Europe, buzzing with accents out of the Bronx and Brooklyn. Two of the women seated in this dining room were to be burned alive the following day in one of the worst factory fires in the history of New York, a catastrophe which was to point its terrible red finger toward important legislation in behalf of improved working conditions. A dark young woman in a remote corner, her face covered with splotches of acne, was secretly laying her plans to become a Carmelite nun. Dozens of women there were, widowed, divorced or separated, their children scattered, boarded out or aborted. Hundreds were unwed, an astonishing proportion,

virgin, all marking time, some hopefully, far too many hopelessly.

With the possible exception of the future nun, and a few transients, there was scarcely a woman in that dining hall whose designs of hope, frustration, love, hate, courage, defeat, or all too seldom, joy, had not been out on the carpet before Sierra.

Seated two removed from her at table, Kitty leaned closer to the Charlottenburg at her side.

"Look at Sierra! Madonna *dolorosa*, but not too *dolorosa*! Each and every one of the crosses borne by these victims of this Home House vermicelli soup is hung in her eyes. No use talking, you have to be born that way, Charlottenburg. She loves these women with a personal and passionate dedication. She even loves that sly-eyed, cockeyed one over there in the checked skirt, who looks as if she's a forelady and pinches her girls. She even loves this carefully nutritious and diet-kitchened leg of lamb."

"With its goddamned mint sauce ——"

"And why is it that succotash reeks so of social service?"

At this point, Sierra, leaning around the intervening figures of Mrs. Caleb Young, a trustee, and Dr. Loretta Yard, the house doctor, whispered into Kitty's ear:

"I don't know what you two are saying, but from your dove-like expressions, I suspect the worst. Be lambs tonight, girls."

With her suède paw, which invariably was the cynosure of Home House eyes, Kitty squeezed Sierra's large cool hand.

"We laugh that we may not weep with awe. But bend closer, and answer me this one, my high priestess. Is it to be fruit jello, prune whip or apricot tapioca for dessert?"

Sierra turned her quiet eyes smilingly away and upon the house doctor.

"Miss Mullane is handing us bouquets, Dr. Yard," she remarked amusedly, "for accomplishing the three-in-one miracle of serving nourishing food which at the same time appeals to the eye and palate."

"Indeed yes," abetted Kitty. "Miss Ames here is on the point of begging another helping of this delicious mint sauce."

Beneath the table, the Charlottenburg's heavy foot landed squarely upon Kitty's, pinioning it. "So she can drown a certain small hell cat in it," she added, *sotto voce*.

Sierra's after-dinner remarks upon this anniversary occasion were scant.

"This is our tenth birthday. Home House could not be what it is without the spirit of love and home you bring into it. Or without our board of directors, or my associates on our staff. And so we are all to be congratulated. And now, since this is a day of no formalities, I suggest that as usual we adjourn to the Forsyth Room for chat and coffee."

The Forsyth Room, gift of Mrs. Charles Forsyth, was in memory of her daughter, Perta, a canteen worker in France during the first World War, who had literally died (of Spanish influenza) in Sierra's arms, in the apartment she had shared with Kitty and the Charlottenburg in the Rue Cambon.

The Forsyth Assembly Hall was reducible, by means of chintz hangings which could shut off the stage, into a lounge of more intimate proportions. Here was evident what was colloquially coming to be known as "the Mullane touch."

Departing willfully from the somewhat rigid tradition of the hotel lounge, Kitty, on less than half her allotted budget, had managed to achieve a room of hand-blocked linen prints, Chippendale, bird cages, growing plants, chintz-like wallpaper, chintz-covered furniture, that was even more hygienic for noise-fatigued women than they themselves realized.

Here the harsh chirography written into faces by din, glare, grit, and fatigue softened beneath the gently tinted glow that was distilled by Kitty's contrived lampshades. Faces tensed from the grinding motion of industry took on something of the quality of the faces of ladies who live graciously. You could walk into Kitty's charmingly achieved Forsyth Room without realizing that here was an endowed home for wage-earning women, with laundry facilities where they could do their own washing, with kitchen for those who could not afford the simple below-cost Home House Restaurant, with sewing rooms for their own dressmaking and machines, donated by a trustee, for mending stockings.

Foregathered in their chintz-and-lamp-lit drawing room were ladies with tired faces to be sure, and the revealing angularities, or rotundities, that go with unpampered bodies. But at Home

House the rigid appurtenances of the machine, the time clock, the office and the counter were rubbed out for the time being, or veiled in Kitty's mists of rosy lights.

"These un- and maladjusted females, one of whom I beg to remain, confuse the hell out of me," said the Charlottenburg, as they moved toward the Forsyth Room. "I can't for the life of me figure out whether they are better off in this tinned elegance or in their natural surroundings where they can let down their back hair, holler out of their tenement windows and keep the coal in the bathtub, if they have one. Why is it, by the way, that in their tenements they are forever airing their bedding out of the windows? Ours must be as foul as a mare's nest from lack of hanging over our window sills."

"Has it ever occurred to you, Charlottenburg, that the homely appendages known as ears, some of them not too washed, which you see on the heads about you, are for overhearing?"

These conversations, carried on through motionless lips, were always obvious to Sierra, but presumably unnoticed by the women of Home House, who knew these occasional visitors more or less affectionately as "Miss Baldwin's two."

"Stop ventriloquizing, Charlottenburg, while we sit at the foot of High Sierra for a bit, and then turn our faces from the scene of this adoration, homeward."

"You're not waiting, then?" asked Sierra, moving toward them through a reluctantly parting lane of the women.

"Godalmighty, no. What these women need is nothing we can do for them. I'm sorry for them, but I remind myself of the fellow who said of his wife the day of her funeral: 'She was a good wife, and a good mother, but I never liked her.'"

"Kitty, take the Charlottenburg home. She's incorrigible."

"Shall we keep the lamp in the window for you, Sierra?"

"I'll be late."

"Good night, and show them the shining road, even if you haven't found it for yourself, or for your two reprobate accomplices."

"That moment when the last guest departs is the old maid's immemorial dilemma. It's been mine for thirty years."

"Look under the napkin on your table when you come home tonight, Sierra," whispered Kitty.

"Yes, and what you'll find waiting for you is probably what I found last night after I'd been listening for two hours to a bad dramatist read a bad play. A jelled egg embalmed in something that tasted like horehound. First-rate for your nutrition, but a goddam note upon which to end a bad day."

"I wish you'd stay on. You fascinate the inmates, including this one."

"Tell them your fat friend and your eccentric playmate in the mauve mitts enjoyed the party from alphabet soup to jello."

"Good night. With us out of the way you can relax and be yourself."

In a way this was true. Even though she had looked and continued to look to both of them for sympathetic co-operation in Home House, their presence, their assaying eye and manner, were undertow to an occasion such as this.

To be sure, the Charlottenburg, by virtue of her social and political prestige, was directly responsible, not only for a city grant of building-line privileges, but for various boons of one sort or another enjoyed by the guests of Home House. Kitty, too, had gone to considerable and nonprofitable efforts, in directions that ranged from discount privileges for Home House women from two of New York's largest popular-priced department stores, to half-rate Sunday Hudson River boat rides for them, to free toilet soap, and private bathing beach privileges. But it continued to remain true that nothing was exempt from their persiflage, free of their excoriation.

Their departure therefore relaxing to her, Sierra turned to the procedure which she observed every Thursday evening, of an hour's after-dinner coffee-and-talk in the large lounge and a later session of private conferences in her office in the old building.

The women milled about later than usual, this evening of the tenth anniversary, a wall of them circumscribing her with their concerns, personalities, problems.

But long after the lights of the lounge were out, and the front doors locked so that late-comers had to ring for the night porter, a stream of residents with private appointments waited their turns, as patients await theirs in a doctor's anteroom, for admittance to Sierra's office in the old building.

There was the forelady in a candy box factory, who was faced

with a tumor operation, which threatened to reveal malignancy. There was that long pending matter of Pauline Agorilla, whose fiancé had again broken prison. Another situation involved the pregnancy dilemma of Clara Bianchi, a headwaitress in a tearoom.

Last came the pretty little thing, new to Home House, Annie Krakow. Anna, a high-speed piece worker in a high-class dress factory, was twenty-five. It was a love affair, of course, with a married man twice her age, who had a daughter exactly Annie's age.

"The Catholic church won't let him free. His wife won't let him free. He won't let himself free. But he can't help lovin' me, Miss Baldwin, any more than I can help lovin' him. He needs me, Miss Baldwin. He's got to have me. It's wonderful to be needed like that. I'm thataway, Miss Baldwin. I need to be needed by Bill ——"

Those were practically the last words addressed to Sierra in this long arduous day packed with events pertaining to the tenth anniversary of Home House.

She carried them, ringing like repetitive bells in her head, home to Twenty-one East. The need to be needed by Bill.

They rang on, as absent-mindedly she partook of Kitty's "snack" which awaited her on the night table beside her bed.

They rang as she stretched herself between the chill sheets.

They rang, as she lay that instant before turning out her light, regarding the framed photograph of Oliver on her dressing table.

They rang: "I'm thataway. I need to be needed by Bill!"



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## CHAPTER XXII

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ONE late afternoon, months later, when Leonore and John were at Saratoga Springs, where he was taking thermal treatments for the lumbar complaint that by now had him in its chronic throes, Kitty suddenly picked up the telephone receiver on the desk of her small boudoir-like office in the Applied Arts Building, and called Oliver Plow at the Baldwin offices.

She caught him at the business day's last act of shutting down one of the roller-top desks which were still in usage in the gloomy and dated Baldwin offices, a desk which Oliver abhorred for its symbolism of his enslavement to the petty side of a major business, and for its horrific golden oak.

"You're in the summer-widower class, Oliver," telephoned Kitty. "Family in the country, furniture shrouded, camphor smelling, blinds drawn, heat embalmed indoors. Why don't we dine together in a cool spot?"

It was the first time she had ever called him at his office in this or any other vein, but no sense of specialness or any particular surprise came over him. In the back of his mind he had rather vaguely intended using up another of these free evenings, occasioned by the absence of Leonore, by way of the shady pastimes to which by nature he was not particularly addicted. Frighteningly not addicted, he sometimes admitted to himself, so that in a

way, his defections, during Leonore's absences, were actually done in a spirit of desiring to desire.

A Miss Daisy Devine, known to him in the years before he had gone to England, had accidentally, by way of a meeting on the street, swum back into his orbit. She was well along now and heavier than in the old days, a brassier version of her one-time brass-colored self. But surrounding her was what she called her family of little daisy replicas of herself when she had been twelve years younger. Daisy Devine's Little Daisies, as they were known "to the trade."

In the back of his mind, Oliver, whose concern over his lack of zest dated back to mumps and adolescence, had been trying to force himself to face a repetition of an evening he had recently spent with one of the full-lipped, high-busted replicas of Daisy, when along came Kitty's telephone call, catching him unawares.

Come to think about it, he and Kitty had never dined alone. That was why he had been caught unawares, as it were, before he had time to ponder if her kind of fillip was what he needed, more than what the Daisies had in store for him. No sooner had he committed himself to Kitty than he began to doubt it.

"Kitty, I'm sorry. I just remember. I've an engagement tonight. I'm a fourth at bridge," he lied.

"O—liver," came her voice, trailing with remonstrance. "You just can't do this to me. Telephone and say you've erysipelas. Something terribly good has happened to me today, Ollie. I want to share it with you, before I even tell the girls. There's that cool little French place where I took you and the Charlottenburg and Sierra one evening. Since I decorated it, I'm naturally a welcome guest there at any time."

That, he knew, was her way of relieving him of a dinner check in a tiny exclusive restaurant where there were no menus, and its discriminating clientele ordered in advance, directly from a chef famous on two continents for his tantrums and vichysoisse.

He was tired and a headache, the shape of a tight hatband, oppressed him. What he needed in this rare interval of freedom from Leonore was perhaps the Daisies.

"Don't let me down on an evening like this, dear. Kitty needs to celebrate, and she needs to celebrate with Ollie."

He had no real reason, except lack of sufficient desire, to refuse.

To say nothing of the fact that another evening with the Daisies, who were ever alert to their commission basis with "the house," was going to be a strain on the budget of one who by temperament, even when recipient of Leonore's largess, chose to spend cautiously.

"I'm a fair-weather girl, Ollie! I like to share my good times and go off in a corner alone when they're bad. Dine with Kits, Ollie. Kitty gottee good news. Kitty's glad and wants to be glad with Ollie."

He complied with a sense of only half wanting what he was agreeing to do.

They met in the small restaurant, the type of pretentiously surreptitious little hideaway just then coming into vogue as "speak-easy," where prohibited liquor at prohibitive prices was served in after-dinner cups, and the food, as if to camouflage the shortcomings of the bootlegged liquor, was of high excellence. The Mullane touch was over the fragile-looking little restaurant of many mirrors, pastel murals done in the playful and faunal key of Steichen, and various tones of light filtering through side brackets ornately shaded in glass grapes.

The dainty light flowed flatteringly over Kitty, dimming the mauve shadows and hair lines that ambulance driving in France, overseas dysentery that had detained her for two hospital months after the Armistice, and all the years of inching slowly toward the various goals of her *bouffant* ambitions, had written into her.

To Oliver there was something perpetually fascinating in the driving force of this woman who had the delicate personality of a woman who must never get her feet wet, or look upon blood, or face havoc, and yet who boasted every initiative he so conspicuously lacked. She was like a transparent doll, every motive showing, personal, worldly and gay motives that were not austere, not even high-minded, but certainly not reprehensible.

He liked her gaiety in particular. It gave him the illusion of also being that way, which he was not. She reminded him of the French Riviera, of Cannes, Nice, Monte Carlo, where he had spent much time during the period of the marriage of his stepmother to his father. Those days were his happiest memories. Days in which you could be a cat in the sun. Blue-and-gold days, to the song of surf, orchestras, slightly venomous veranda or cabana

chatter. Women half-dressed on the beaches by day and half-naked in the casinos by night. The odor of that life somehow hung over Kitty. She was as pleasantly poison as the international set which actually he too had never more than glimpsed, but remembered because its indolence and intolerance mirrored his own. At the same time, as in the case of the Charlottenburg and Sierra, there was something a little frightening about Kitty. To be in her presence, particularly alone with her, was the equivalent of what he imagined it would be like to be lashed to the spokes of the wheel of a steam engine.

Kitty, seated opposite him in the speak-easy, was a small steel structure covered with fluff. Like Sierra and the Charlottenburg, she took from a fellow some of his right to exist. They did not achieve it by doing, but rather, by being. These terrible three! No man in their presence felt his stature, his weight, or for that matter, his maleness.

The terrible vitality of the three in Twenty-one East! By their very existence they made a man feel as if he were standing on a siding while an express train roared past, leaving him wind-blown and breathless. They were the three most exciting women he had ever known. Br-r-r!

What spoils had Kitty brought home now? A new dancing team for the Charlottenburg to exploit into fame? Trained falcons for ladies to wear on their wrists? A commission from the Pope to paint the Fifth Avenue Cathedral the moment's fashionable color known as "mullane mauve"?

"What is it, Kits?" he asked across the table. "An opal tiara for fat Mrs. Opdike? Invisible lorgnettes for nearsighted dowagers?"

"No, although I do have an idea for divisible ones that fold to the size of a five-cent piece. But this time, Ollie, my suave and satin one, it is something I've wanted for eight years!"

"Could it be me?"

"It could, Ollie, and is, only you're so darn taken."

His entire face jumped at that, as if of a nervous contraction, and she hurried on, as abashed as he was stunned at having been rudely stepped on where he was so cruelly vulnerable.

"It's something I've connived for, screwed for, prayed for, and, believe me, paid for, in tears of boredom. It happened today.

Matty Dowling's stepmother, you know, the hardware millions one ——"

"—who took you to California last year ——"

"Precisely. That was part of my ground work. Part of the tears of boredom. The old girl is a hellion on wheels. But she likes me, Ollie."

"I can understand that."

"No dusty platitudes, please. But she says I am to her what her own daughters aren't. Truth of the matter is that they don't have to take the punishment any longer, now that they're grown and in the money. I do. So don't think I'm getting something for nothing. I've sweated blood for this."

"For what?"

"She's going to finance me in the dream of my life."

"That Kitty Mullane, Incorporated idea of yours?"

"Exactly! Kitty Mullane, Inc. Caterers to Connoisseurs. Dealers in authentic. Will supply anything from pigeon blood to pigeon-blood rubies, to Corots, carrots, Baltic sturgeon, Currier and Ives, Spode, planked steaks, Maltese crosses, Angora cats, aquamarines and marine models. Merchants in Beauty. Perhaps that's why I wanted you to be first to share my news. You classify under authentic beauty, Ollie. Long, graceful, smooth, almond-like. Not too aggressively male. Yet pleasantly so."

He preferred the Leonore or even the Daisy brand of flattery. Kitty, fluffy as a parfait, nevertheless made it sound patronizing. She said it, as it were, through her sharp appraising eyes. Her lips blowing it to him as she blew smoke through her flaring nostrils which, he always fancied, she rouged to make them fine-fettled. Shifting, he cut a canapé of *foie gras* with his fork.

"Why shouldn't an old potato like Marion Dowling be glad to back a smart girl like you with a couple of million?"

"Don't be silly. She's backing me for exactly thirty-five thousand, which makes her my loquacious silent partner, on the well-known fifty-fifty basis."

"Do you think she could be induced to turn over her share of the large profits to a certain poor devil of a roller-top desk slave, whose stepmother's husband mistakes him for the office boy?"

"No, but I could be induced to turn over mine, Ollie—and I would—and I'd love it over and above the telling ——"

He looked quickly into her face, ready to match her quizzical eyes with his own, but stopped at what he saw there.

The small careful face of Kitty was no longer the small careful face of Kitty. Even structurally it seemed to have changed. It was the softly molded face of a Kitty that had never been, not even when she was younger. It was a face unmistakably filled with tender meaning. The thought flashed crudely through to Oliver. Good God, this woman is wanting to make me.

Not for naught, although, let it be admitted, due to no particular volition of his own, had Oliver seen this same look awaken on face after face of woman after woman. It was a predatory look, out after his weakness. They reached, these women, to coddle, as they would for the weakness embodied in an infant. He knew their brooding fascination for what he was not. Countless the times it had come after him.

This woman with her light and rather beautiful steel structure of a face, whose very presence caused his sense of his weakness to draw him like an ashamed rat into retreat, was actually about to make the classic overture to him—to him a glorified office boy, and that only by the largess of his stepmother's husband!

Oh, he knew that shot of a look across Kitty's face. He had seen it leap across the faces of scores of women stronger than he. He had even seen it flash into the humorous oyster-colored eyes of the Charlottenburg, and most certainly into the lambency of the face of Sierra. But this across the table from him now was more than passive overture and unspoken or unrealized thought. This was the Leonore impulse! This was what would reach out and engulf him if he permitted. Only this from Kitty lacked the security he enjoyed with Leonore, who risked her name without claiming the game.

The silent shudder that passed through him was revulsion, not particularly to Kitty, but hang it, what was the use pretending! Women who were other than just passive darlings were something to cause the flesh of apprehension to rise. Give him a clever woman every time. Of course, no man worth his salt preferred dollies with sawdust in their heads. But deliver him from the kind that caused you to shiver with apprehension of their bright edges.

Kitty's sort and the Charlottenburg's, and, in a different way, even Sierra's, gave him that dreaded sense of impotence.

He was a fool! He was a three times fool! Any one of those three, yes, even the Charlottenburg, whose fatness held strange fascination for him, would have been—he could have sworn it—well—er, at least amenable to approach.

Dammit all, if it were not for that perverse cussedness that got at him where vigorous women were concerned, a man in his wretched position might jolly well choose the position of husband to any one of these three.

The roles of stepson to Leonore, thingamabob to Baldwin, spaniel on a cushion, menial in an office, opera escort, bridge fourth—yes, gigolo—awakened in him revulsion chiefly when they impeded his comfort. Otherwise his relationship with Leonore was fixed enough in its orbit. His position was not wholly unpleasant. Security of a sort. Protection, at least protection from these lady hounds out of an efficiency hell.

Kitty, light as steel, relentless as steel, and who, least of all of them, appeared to be that, would encompass him. Yes, even from his low vantage of spaniel on a cushion, Oliver recoiled from that.

This woman wanted to marry him, even as he could have sworn, with his intuition, that Sierra and the Charlottenburg had at least speculated on such a possibility.

It was not that they were so much older, or that Kitty was a shade too—too everything; that Sierra was too absurdly remote; that the Charlottenburg was too grossly grotesque; it was—hell, a man simply didn't marry these women. More like these women to marry one another, if you came right down to it. Not to infer that there was fire to that wisp of gossip smoke which hovered over them.

As Kitty leaned across the table with that sudden effect of the molding of her skeleton showing through her face, he was like a lad who did not like fruit, holding his hat for the winter apples that were going to be shaken from the tree.

"Oliver, we're free, white, and considerably over twenty-one. I'm by way of getting almost everything I want. Marry me, Oliver, and make it all of what I want. We two can make quite a go of it."

He thought vaguely as he recoiled in his spirit: How fantastic

that he, Oliver Plow, lap dog, office boy, fourth hand at bridge, was by way of refusing to marry Kitty Mullane, for no reason (certainly not the reason of Leonore) except that—dammit, men didn't choose to marry lady hounds out of efficiency hells. They just didn't choose, not even those like himself, with practically all to gain and so very little to lose.

"You're putting me in a devil of a spot, Kitty. I admire you so much, but—but dammit—how can I—a fellow—like me—Kitty, I can't. Not you. How can I——"

She placed her mauve paw over his.

"By not explaining, Ollie. I was prepared to lose. I think you're an unutterable ass to pass me up, but let's not be tragic about it. It's all in the day's work. So much muddy water under the bridge. All right?"

"You're magnificent."

"My, my! Magnificent, am I? Well, well, just see where it's got me!"



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## CHAPTER XXIII

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OCCASIONALLY, when the sun poured down upon the supine city and through the stifling nights bricks and asphalt remained hot to the touch, Sierra found herself asking herself why, with the exception of a week end with her father and Leonore at the Adirondack camp, she alone had chosen to remain in town throughout a summer of relentlessly unbroken heat.

In the midst of the highly profitable enterprise of a Diet and Reducing Farm in eastern Maine, which they had leased from a defunct prize fighter who had used it as training quarters, the Charlottenburg and Kitty wrote frequently, describing the pleasant room awaiting her in an annex cottage, well-removed from the score or so of beauty seekers who paid fabulously in order to be deprived of the luxuries of diet and surroundings.

"Come on up here," wrote the Charlottenburg, "and see how they love to pay for what they could have at home, free, for nothing, but prefer to come to us and have it packaged for them at five hundred a week. Corinne Chisholm arrived yesterday, to get in form for the Gus Thomas play she is to do in the autumn. Annette Keller is also training down for her new comedy and claims we've discovered the road to youth. We do it by way of early to bed and early to rise. Pine woods. No food with their meals. Fruit juices. The massage, the thermal baths, the needle

showers and the stomach rollers are the fancy but unnecessary addenda which go with the expensive packaging. Be that as it may, they leave here feeling like a million dollars, which makes the five hundred a week a modest-enough rate. Kitty Shylock Mullane would raise it to twice that if I'd let her. As it is, it's a shame to take the money."

But the summer wore away and Home House, filled to capacity, drew the immense heat of the long days of a long summer into its brick and mortar, and Sierra, deep in plans for an annex to the Annex, not only lived her days, but slept as well, in the torridness of Home House, what with Twenty-one East profitably sublet for three months, at Kitty's insistence, to a South American coffee merchant and his family.

The North American agency rights for this Brazilian product, about to be launched as "Quickie Coffee," had been negotiated shortly after a young Brazilian short-story writer had brewed the Charlottenburg a chance cup of the coffee which he carried about with him on his travels, and which could be prepared in less than a minute.

With the exception of an infrequent evening with the Charlottenburg on those occasions when she came to New York during that summer on this coffee deal, or with Oliver, whom Leonore somehow managed to detain in the Adirondacks beyond his allotted vacation time, the burning months inched along in unviolated routine.

Several times in the miasma of heated nights, Sierra, with the sheets thrown back from her toasting body, had repetitiously dreamed that she was sleeping in a motionless city, with the living dead moving through its hushed streets, or was it the dead living?

Waking unrefreshed out of rows of such stagnant nights, had printed circles beneath her eyes and lost her weight. But come summers, go summers, they brought no cessation of the problems of Home House. Deprivation, frustration, despair, tragedy, comic relief, fear, expectation, poverty, sex, defeat, romance, death, birth, came knocking, winter and summer alike, at her crowded little office in the Old Building. Regardless of season, these lives, tossed, blown or capsized, as the case might be, drifted or crashed against her doors, and come heat, come cold, she remained.

Into one of these typical days, when the city seemed to have coagulated and died in its tracks, there burst upon Sierra the unexpected figure of her father's wife.

She was wearing the quickened manner characteristic of her when there were men about. At home, alone, she could relax from it to placidity, which she wore like a charming negligee for members of her immediate family. Sierra knew this to be the stimulated version of her father's wife which entered her office. Closing her large deaconess hands over Leonore's, she could feel them beating.

"What brings you to town, Leonore?"

"I knew you would ask that," replied Leonore, her voice f of breath as she peeled off transparent net gloves. "It makes it easier to begin. I see no reason why the hordes of women who live here can stream in upon you day after day, and a person like myself feel so inhibited about coming to the oracle. After all, I *am* your 'watchamacallum.'"

"What's on your mind?"

"I can't pull the load any more, Sierra."

"I see."

"I know you do. That's why I'm here."

"It was your bargain."

"I thought what I needed was security. But I'm sick of it. I'm flattened out with security, dead with it. I'm a candidate for the padded cell with security. It's degrading to feel so transparent where you are concerned. But it's convenient and saves talk about what else ails me. Among the more mentionable ills, your father is too dull for me, Sierra. He's killing me with dullness. I'd rather he'd kill me with infidelity. Anything seems more endurable than being shut up there in the north woods or down here in Murray Hill with his dullness. In fact, it's a little worse down here, with alternatives so close. I want out. He's old and tired. I'm old, but not tired, and when a woman of my years has vitality left, it's a terrible sort of last-gasp vitality. Listen to me, Sierra, as if I were any one of the women here who come to you. I'm not better off than the worst of them. Help me."

"You're overtired."

"Nonsense, that's alibi and we both know it. I'm overtired of your father. I never dreamed I could be as tired of anyone."

"In other words, you figure that in these few years with him you have earned the life settlement Father has fixed on you."

"Sierra, believe this, because it's true. Much as I needed your father's marriage settlement on me in my name, I wouldn't have gone in for this if I had realized—that it was going to mean the end of life for me—and that's what it's being. The end of life."

"Why not try some other arrangement first, Leonore? Father takes all he can get, but he'll take less. Your conscientiousness makes a slave of you. He wouldn't want it that way if he realized. Remember, Leonore, he starved so long for the bright things you mean to him."

"I know. I know. I know. He's good. I've failed, that's all. We have to reckon from there on."

"But ——"

"I'm at that peculiar time of life, if you want to know. It's come to me very much later than to most. If these women who live here can let off steam in order not to explode with their miseries, even their menopause ones, why should a person like myself feel so terribly inhibited? After all, they're strangers. I'm your whatchamacallum."

"You are at a time of life, Leonore, when you are entitled to be a bit overwrought. Nature ——"

"That's alibi again. I'm tired of your father, Sierra. I made a bargain I can't keep, for a thousand maddening, maddening little reasons and one major one."

"Oliver?"

"Oliver."

The name dropped like a quick plummet into a silence between them, into which Leonore finally burst, challengingly.

"Take that away from me and you snip the last thread that holds me to life. I'm that near the end of my endurance."

"Don't say that, Leonore."

"Is that what you say to these women with faces like vacant lots who move through these hopeless corridors that lead to their lonely rooms? What would you say to one of them, who came to you as I am coming to you, carrying the ruins of a hopeless life with my husband on one side and an Oliver on the other? What would you say?"

"I would say to them, Leonore, and oh, I say it to you, that your help must come from within."

"Any corner-church preacher can do that well for me. I'm at the end of my rope and you give me a picture-card motto. I'm at the end of my rope, and you—and you ——"

Suddenly Leonore began to cry.

"Leonore, Leonore, please!"

"Save me from going all the way into—into—Oh, my God, I don't know into what. Save me, Sierra, I'm losing my grip—for all I know, I'm just like your mother—cracking up ——"

The large padlike hand of Sierra came firmly down against her mouth, pressing back the words.

"Leonore, you don't know what you're saying."

"Oh, yes I do. Neither will I be made to feel abnormal about it any longer. What I am saying in words of few syllables is that Oliver isn't kith or kin to me, and I've reached the stage where I wouldn't care if he were!"

"You're not yourself."

"I am myself at last, is what you mean. Leonore's herself all right, after a lifetime of not being."

She dropped to her knees, placing her face against Sierra's lap.

"You won't believe it, Sierra. I wouldn't if I were someone else. But all these years—all these years it has remained what you call Platonic, if Plato can be responsible for anything so unnatural, so hurtful, so wrong, so cruel—all—these wasted years ——"

A wave of something she had not realized was pent up in her flooded Sierra, causing her to feel as if, on the flash of a wing, an old dread had taken flight from her.

Then Leonore did not own Oliver! They had not possessed one another, beyond those stolen moments in hallways or over a late card table. A sense of lightness mounted in her as this strange cargo of a long subconscious apprehension went overboard.

If Leonore did not actually possess Oliver, then no one did. What did that matter to her own private personal living? Elatedly, it did!

"You can't understand, Sierra—you, so remote—you, so mother superior ——"

Couldn't she! Speculations crowded immediately in upon her.

"But I swear to you, Sierra," sobbed Leonore, "I would still leave your father even if Oliver didn't exist. All the good things that your father is aren't enough. It's what he isn't, makes the difference. I thought security would make up for—for what the novels call marriage-in-name-only. But there are conditions even a parasite like me can't endure. I don't know what drove your mother, but I wonder if it wasn't the godawful everlasting dullness. Save me from the lunacy of dullness, Sierra. Help your father's wife!"

"But you can't do this thing to my father!"

"Why! Look what I've done to myself. A woman who wants to live has come to you dying of starvation. I've good years left, Sierra. I can't go through them living on husks."

"You knew all this when you married my father."

"All right! I bought our security, Oliver's and mine. Loathsome and anything else you want to call it. But I've given in return. Years of it. Shall I tell you something? If your father hadn't met immense losses after the war, I'd have done this years ago. I wish I didn't want to live so terribly, Sierra. Then all this dreadfulness of getting out from under wouldn't seem worth going through, with its shame and blame that lie ahead for us. But as long as Oliver is on earth, it's sweet to be here too. Hell's fire would be sweet."

"Get up from the floor, Leonore. Hold onto yourself."

"Oh, I know," she said, rising tiredly and sinking her suddenly tearless face into her hands. "You're going to be strong and quiet, as only you can be. But, oh, Sierra, if you have any new technique for women at the end of their rope, prepare to use it now. Your calm strength alone isn't going to do the trick for me. I'm at the end. You've never had a woman in this room who was more so. What can you do to save me, Sierra? Save me from going the way of your mother—save me."

A rush of trembling, deep as a tree shake, laid hold of Sierra. For the instant it lasted, flash after flash of memory raced across the retina of her mind. The dreadful stare, packed with nothing, that Mamie Baldwin used to concentrate upon her daughters, causing Florence to burst into hysteria. The sounds of Mamie Baldwin, talking fiercely to herself. Sudden animal-like sounds

in the night, and doors that were hastily closed, to isolate the girls from the noises of outbreak. The collapse of a sanity was an act of God as cataclysmic as a typhoon, except that the destruction of a mind was not over and done with. The memories of the growing madness of Mamie fitted down like a hot metal skullcap, burned in and through. Florence, off in New Zealand, was so stamped with such indelible memories that when she came down of a fever due to infected well water, her husband wrote that over and over again in her delirium she relived the horrors of her recollections of the catastrophe of her mother's madness.

"I know it's terrible of me to have put it that way to you, Sierra—but I am going to crack up just as she did if I don't find a way to salvage what years I have left. Don't look at me like that, Sierra! Any dumb brute has my instinct to survive—don't look like that!"

But she did, feeling as if her eyes were lakes drained dry, down to rocky beds, and would not refill.

"Are you without pity? You, who are supposed to be a merchant in it?"

Leonore was right. Her frozen pain for her stepmother began to flow. A sense of the pitiableness of all human beings, an emotion to which she was so easily susceptible, gushed through her. This broken, dwarfed, and thwarted creature, her skin beginning to dry and flake with the years, but her eyes still young and thirsting with the desire to be happy! There was something abashing about her greed for it.

Poor Leonore, her snide life caught thus in a web of machinations she could not master. Poor Leonore, so pitiable, so eager to live and be, and such a stumbler in the dark of her own poor spirit! With every ounce of push she could conjure to meet this situation on its merits, Sierra sat there, wanting what was Leonore's to be Leonore's; rationalizing, and over and over again summoning before herself the picture of her father, who would stand up better than Leonore under punishment. This woman, not worth his little finger, held his happiness. No! Even bending too far backward in her effort to hold herself as impersonal as if Leonore were any woman, the answer remained No!

"What about my father in all this?"

"He's geared to life as it comes. I want ——"

"You want what you want, at any cost. And now you want release, even at the price of him. I say *no*, Leonore."

"You tombstone to my happiness!"

"I am not willing to write my father's epitaph."

"Oh, how right Eric Simonson, the sculptor, was! You remember. I tried to induce you to sit for him. He wanted to do you in dead-white marble, as sort of a world mother superior. He was right. People in masses appeal to your sympathy. Your women here are not individuals to you. They are social problems. What do you know about the machinery that makes me as an individual go around!"

"Leonore, I do."

"Well, so much the worse. Then knowing, what do you care?"

"I do. I do."

"Then do something about it. Even you, great white mother superior, must have it in you to realize that the commonness of my clay is the same that wrings your heart when these women, who are mere strangers, come to you for the help you love to dole out to them. I'm older than middle-aged, Sierra. Life is slipping away from me, Sierra. All my life I've been trying to capture some of it for myself. And there is so little time left!"

"Enough Leonore, for you to wreck my father, who, according to span-of-life expectancy, has much less time left than you."

"He is willing to sit out what remains of his. I'm not. Mine has precious years to salvage, Sierra. Help me."

"Why, why did you do it in the beginning, Leonore? Because you wanted your cake and to eat it too. Because you gambled on the hazards that beset the life span of a man my father's age, and lost. Father has good years still left! It's all been so transparent, Leonore. To everyone except perhaps my father, and I'm not sure about him. You've been good to him. I can forgive you much because of that. In spite of yourself, you've enriched his life with the kind of gleam you carry on your very flesh, as a glowworm carries its light. Don't flutter away from him now, Leonore. He needs your gleam even if it gives no warmth."

"Sierra, you don't understand."



"I understand too well."

"With your mind, perhaps. But not with your—your heart and soul. They're too—too—high. You're—a perpetual virgin, Sierra. No matter how many men might ever possess you, you would remain one. Some women are like that."

"I don't know what you are talking about, Leonore."

"Of course you don't. That's part of being the kind of person you are. You don't know what I mean because you haven't the emotional apparatus to feel what I mean. You know things about all these women objectively, but you don't know those things with goose flesh down your spine."

"I —"

"You're sexless or sex-starved, borderline something or other, or whatever it is drives three strange birds like you and Kitty and the Charlottenburg together. I've heard worse explanations, and have fought your battle more than you know, because I know it's not that. But I'm just a normal everyday woman, Sierra, who has bitten off a larger piece than she can swallow. I've tried to play the game of my marriage with your father every inch of the way. You know that. You've seen the struggle with your own eyes."

"You made your—bed."

"I know. I know. I made it, and I've tried to lie on it, but it's not my kind of bed! I was so terribly, terribly tired when I made it! With Oliver in England, it seemed to me—well, it seemed I could do what it transpired I couldn't. True, I made my bed, but there is something left in me that is too young to lie on that kind of bed, if I must say it all. I thought I was at a time in my life when an old man could offer sufficient compensations. But I can't go on toting an old man up to his bed every night and come back for that hour of suppressed desires, sitting on a sofa beside the man I love! There, you have it now! The years are marching. Life is marching. Oliver is—oh, Sierra, if you only knew!"

If she only knew! Sitting there at her desk, the fingers of Sierra's clasped hands bit into her flesh until the nails whitened. If she only knew!

"There is nothing wrong about my feelings for Oliver! He is

no more my blood kin than your father is my blood kin. I have the same right to be in love with Oliver that you might have!"

"Please, Leonore!"

"Well, there's nothing so fantastic about that. All of you women would be better off if you faced your physiology as well as your psychology."

"Leonore!"

"I've the right to Oliver. When I married Oliver's father, Oliver was sixteen and I was twenty-six. I didn't dream it then, but I know it now. I've been in love with him since he was sixteen. I loved the youth. I love the man, although I've fought it as you would hell's fire. Now, at the extreme edge of my middle years, I ask myself why. Why? I've had the name but not the game. You must have wondered about that, haven't you? You who have never suffered except through the pain of others."

"Leonore, don't say that!"

"It's the pain right down here in your breastbone, here, where I'm pounding because it hurts so; here, where there's desire and love—sex love, if you will—that's real. Real as beautiful, burning hell."

"Sex love—that's real—real as beautiful burning hell." The words steamed and sang; a boiling kettle of words with a too powerful aroma.

"Your kind of pain for the world, Sierra, and my kind of pain, the pain in me, Leonore Baldwin—the pain I carry around morning, noon and night inside me, the pain I've carried here with me, slept with last night, lived with all year, last year, the year before—are two different things. Yours is the pain of knowing there is famine off in China and wanting to do something for fifty million. It's grand. It's Christ-like. But mine is the pain of famine in my own soul. I can't live with it any more. At least you can turn your back on the pain of the world at night, and sleep. It's another thing to sleep with your own pain. Bah, after all, what do you, with your bifurcated minds, know about living and loving? After all, I am what I am. A woman in love and fighting for it. You can't be a whole woman when you've only half-lived. Not even you clever ones. What do you know about hunger for the reality of a mate by night—close—tight.

Or does seeing a woman being a woman shock you too much ——”

“Leonore, go now. Go and let me think this thing. I need to.”

“Too elementary, am I! I want my man! And so do you if the truth were known, and Kitty with her hot serpent’s eyes, and even that old fat martinet. You’re all as starved as I am for the kind of nourishment that makes a woman really alive. You drape careers across your cheated façades, and it makes a fine show. Bah, for all your career finery!”

“Leonore, you’re not yourself!”

“Then help me be myself. I’m flesh and blood and in pain. Help me fight for my right—to be myself.”

“Your right to live is not something to be squalled for, Leonore. Happiness is to be earned. I don’t mean to sound like a copy book, but it’s something that has its roots in the soil of human virtues. The barren deserts of selfishness and self-fulness do not grow it. Happiness is something to be earned.”

“Well, God knows, if anyone has, you’ve earned it, Sierra. Are you happy? No, no, don’t evade. Are you? Are you? Answer me that.”

Terrified with the sudden imminence of tears, Sierra rose, slowly.

“I can’t go on with this now, Leonore. I need to be alone and think—this thing—I need to be alone ——”

“Are you? You’ve earned the right to be happy. Are you? Are you?”

“Go—Leonore!”

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## CHAPTER XXIV

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GALA HOUSE was a venture into which, in exchange for the combined sponsorship of Kitty and the Charlottenburg, Elsie Tweed had invested sixty-five thousand dollars on a one-third profit-sharing basis.

The idea had been born out of a chance remark of Elsie's, who was concerned over the inability of her second son, Le Roy, to get his clutch into any sort of business enterprise following his return from France two years after the Armistice.

This observation, coupled with the fact that Kitty had long had an appraising eye on the beautiful old Crowley mansion, which, standing empty in Fifty-third Street's best block, could be rented for a song, brought about a liaison of ideas that resulted in Gala House.

In what had once been the boudoir of the socially renowned and beautiful Marion Crowley, reconstructed now into a small gem of an oval-shaped office, Le Roy Tweed, absent-minded, shell-shocked, sat at an oval desk for about forty-five minutes a day and talked over the telephone to the wife of an international polo champion, a lady with whom he was beginning what ultimately transpired to be an internationally scandalous affair.

It had also been the dream of Le Roy's mother that the new interest of Gala House might prove a successful device for

breaking up this threatened liaison. Within the confines of Twenty-one East, however, Kitty declared that their guarantee against Le Roy's ever meddling in the affairs of Gala House was his continued infatuation for the wife of the polo player.

Following this remark, the Charlottenburg had turned explosively to Sierra.

"How in God's name do you stand all this from us, Sierra? It must be our incomparable charm that makes our way of life endurable to you."

"I confess I am strongly addicted to fondness for the team of Charlottenburg-Mullane."

"No, you're not. You're addicted to seeing beyond the ugly puny motives of your conniving colleagues into their true, if deeply submerged, hearts of gilt."

Nevertheless, it remained desirable that Le Roy utilize the brief daily period he spent in his oval office at Gala House in amorous idling over the telephone. It kept the organization free of what would surely have been his infantile, wasteful, and potentially dangerous, interventions.

As it transpired, despite serious and secret forebodings on the part of Kitty and the Charlottenburg, four stories of Gala House (incorporated Gala Club as a means to a liquor license in a prohibition age) took form around him but oblivious of him. Kitty's playhouse for a postwar world of boyish girls and girlish boys, the backwash of shell shock, economic skyrocketing and national fatigue, was a mammoth spinning top, dizzying to the senses, designed for their confusion and delight.

There were a dancing and a dining floor, Debutante Lounge; Tea-and-Better Room; ping pong, bridge and mah jong parlors; Rendez-Vous Bar, and last but not least, Gala Club's greatest publicity asset, the Star-Dust Room, with its revolving blue dome, star-studded, that gave the illusion of open Neopolitan sky.

Cassie Cassandra and Olin Sparkes were to help dance this room, and incidentally Gala Club, into fame. With the original idea of Gala House altered to meet the requirements of prohibition strictures, the pencil-thin, postwar flappers of the era could now swing their silk legs from the high stools before the mirrored bar, as cocktail hour at Gala became the fad.

The impeccable morale that miraculously seemed to hover over

Gala Club was due, the Charlottenburg declared, to the happy incidence of Kitty's moral sense residing in her fastidiousness. You didn't become disorderly at Gala Club. If you threatened to, you were disposed of as quietly and unostentatiously as the ashes in their cigarette receivers were cleared by trained attendants.

No hiccoughs in Gala Club. "Satisfied mothers who are not afraid to let their young ones come to us yield more than the increased liquor sales that lead to hiccoughs," was Kitty's succinct explanation of the high tone of deportment that characterized her play house.

"Your morals, my dear, fluctuate between your fastidiousness and your pocketbook," the Charlottenburg had remarked dryly.

"Whatever motive you impute, dear sister Sweetness-and-Light, you can lay your thirty-three-and-a-third percentage of the nice fat spoils to Kitty's knowing what she's doing and why."

That was true enough. The social, political and professional powers who were to help make Gala Club highly lucrative, and who formed a steady stream of motorcar arrivals the afternoon and evening that the modish doors of the town's new play house swung open, had been painstakingly chosen and achieved.

Add to these machinations the sure-handed touch of the Charlottenburg, a hand that had finger in so many pies, the social prestige of the house of Pretorious-Tweed, the curiosity value of the strange three from Twenty-one East, the *souçon* and more, of exquisite taste, political acumen, showmanship, shrewdness, flair for merchandising, and you have the quality that aroused the huzzas of those for whom Gala Club was designed.

Gala Club needed to strike its gala pace from the hour it was born, and Kitty had seen to it that its tills yielded from then on.

Climaxing an opening-day galaxy of two orchestras and a baker's dozen of professional entertainers of high rank, Enrico Caruso, who dined frequently at Twenty-one East on spaghetti and goose liver, which Kitty prepared for him over a chafing dish, suddenly volunteered to sing *Ridi Pagliacci* from the landing of the grand staircase. Flashing after him, Irene Castle, widowed by now, corraled one of Charlottenburg's erstwhile European dancers for some effective impromptu exhibitions. Next, Sandra Cassandra, in the "personalized posturings" for

which she was now famous. At midnight the Charlottenburg introduced, "for the first time to an American audience," her Viennese Champagne Petits, an imported octette of dancers each of whose eight members was to become a toast of the town, and the ugly duckling of them marry its richest scion.

This latest tour de force, which ultimately was to enable them to pay off Elsie and oust Le Roy at the end of the twenty-second month, gave new emphasis to the already well-defined personalities behind Gala Club; personalities easily recognizable by now in magazine, caricature and rotogravure.

The Graces of Twenty-one East had done it again! That Sierra Baldwin played little if any part in these various vigorous enterprises seemed in no way to subtract from the general impression to the contrary. The Graces of Twenty-one East were three!

The opening of Gala Club also implied Sierra, even though, irrelevant to it as a deaconness, she moved with the stream of guests seeing the building for the first time, despite the fact that her father had been instrumental in drawing its lease.

As a matter of fact, the Charlottenburg herself was a strange troglodyte in this fantastic cave of Kitty's fancy. As she held court in the Star-Dust Room, its sapphire dome pouring a sort of frosty iridescence over her idolesque figure, high-explosives popped off her lips.

"Great cream-colored Christopher Columbus! Of all the goddam fripdoopery Kitty has fripdooped in a long and vicious career, this, whatever it is all about, must be traced to a form of idiocy resulting from having been dropped down three flights of stairs in her infancy by her nurse."

The Charlottenburg knew what it was all about, down to the number of Prague hams in the newly installed freezing plant, the content of the wine cave, which she had personally compiled with the collaboration of a wine steward especially imported from Cannes. The Charlottenburg knew what it was about, from the number of politicians who had been reached in order to make Gala Club more easily possible, to the insurance and license assessments of the premises, to the problems of linen, laundry, light, and garbage disposal.

Seated beneath the imitation dome of heaven, fat, saurian, sardonic, drawing the hordes of exploring guests into her lair

by the centrifugal force of her presence, the Charlottenburg, in the manner expected and by now virtually demanded of her, opened vituperative fire upon her guests.

"Welcome, futile ones, to our house of futility! When in doubt of how most mercifully to commit the foul murder known as killing time, come to Gala Club. When you would fritter away your existences, misspend your youth, dawdle away irredeemable time, come to Gala Club, where we aim to profit in a big way by your frailties. Get out of here, my children. The trenches reeked, but so does Miss Mullane's new perfume, 'Star Dust,' which, by the way, is on sale here in the Star-Dust Room at the Perfume Bar. Sixteen-fifty an ounce. Or Miss Mullane's renowned 'Dear Desire,' at the same price. Suit or shoot yourselves. To my way of thinking, all perfume stinks. If you don't believe me, read up on Aphrodite."

"Isn't she matchless! Did you hear her insult Laurel about her rolled stockings? If anyone else had said that! Aren't they a marvelous three! Have you seen the new Kitty Mullane necklaces? Altman's have a window of them this week. Nothing in the world but gilded clam shells, my dear, the kind you pick up on the beach. She originated them for the Ali Baba Revue. Thirty-two dollars and fifty cents, my dear, for a few clam shells. *Vogue* has a half-page of them this month. Shh-h-h, that's Sierra Baldwin, the third one. She looks like a slightly effeminate monk, or is it a slightly masculine nun? They say she's the real money and the real brains, but never shows on the surface of things. Three gal friends, whatever else besides."

"There's nothing to those rumors. It's the nasty-minded world we live in."

"Where there's smoke ——"

"Probably from some gossip's cigarette."

"Look at la Baldwin. Whatever la Charlottenburg is whispering to her, she looks as if butter would freeze in her mouth."

"The old dragon is probably having her conversational hiss concerning the foibles of us customers."

This from a sharp-profiled young matron who played bridge for high stakes, hit the mark, because the Charlottenburg was in the act of observing to Sierra that bad manners were most noticeable in the human race before and after the age of thirty.



The unexcited eyes of Sierra moved across the excited scene, resting without flicker upon the arriving figures of Leonore, Oliver and her father, inching their way toward the Charlottenburg as she squatted short-legged on the Borghese throne-chair set up for her by Kitty.

Less than two hours previous, this same elegant, self-possessed Mrs. Baldwin, apparently so rightly fixed within her orbit, had laid her head, elegantly coiffured, on the desk of Sierra's office and sobbed out a decision over which, deep down, Sierra could still feel herself trembling.

It had been a terrible and revealing scene, that climaxed many predecessors in that same office dating back to that first hot day in August, and now here she was, the scant two hours later, not only in the finery of fur and furbelow, but the finery of the carefully draped expression, the flowery smile, the amethyst glitter of eye. Across this face lay no trace of the maggots of despair at work within the flesh, and as Sierra's anxious eye sought out her father, nothing across his expression indicated awareness of the precariousness of his design of existence.

Their interrelated lives as complicated as the pattern of the huge Chinese embroidery that hung from ceiling to floor of the Star-Dust Room, Leonore, John and Oliver pushed through the crush, the two of them more or less in rhythm with the crowd, John Baldwin awkwardly at variance, jabbing and being jabbed in return.

"Here comes a large sore thumb known as your father," remarked the Charlottenburg, spying him. "He sticks out because he has come out of a sense of duty to the strange doings of the strange friends of his strange daughter."

"Nonsense. Father is here because he cannot keep his fascinated eyes from watching what makes you tick."

"A good many males have been able to keep both their eyes and their hands off me for a good many years, as the testimony of Oliver, here, will bear out. Young man, I take it that nothing short of my devastating, sylph-like charm has drawn you hither?"

Oliver raised his lusterless eyes, smiled with them, and stooped to kiss the short square cushion of her hand.

"Many a true word, Charlottenburg."

The omnipresent figure of Kitty, diaphanous in mauve and trailing chiffons, lit upon the group.

"John B., I must show you our wine cave! It's a natural one out of the rock strata that practically run through Manhattan and make subways. Your mining engineer's soul will marvel. And you, Ollie! You must see the frieze above the bar that the Charlottenburg's little Armenian is going to make his reputation on. You know. The artist she picked up in her ambulance one night at Amiens. We hope it won't shock you, but we do hope it will shock the press. It's a new version of Aphrodite! Will you come too, John B.?"

"I'll remain back," replied the father of Sierra, "and swap practicalities with Miss Charlottenburg."

"And you, Leonore?"

"You go along with Kitty, Oliver. John and I are remaining only a few minutes. We'll come back another time when there is less crush. I think you should stay on, Oliver, and see this historic occasion through with Kitty and the Charlottenburg. Perhaps Sierra will come home to dinner with her father and me?"

The impact of this seemingly casual observation landed variously, beginning in John Baldwin's mild surprise, Sierra's lack of it, and on to the accented amazement of the remaining pair from Twenty-one East. It was without precedent for Leonore thus to forego her established monopoly of Oliver's freedom. Oliver did not "stay on" places. Here was something as strange as the expression in Sierra's face. Oliver off his silken leash! His gray and lambent eyes filled with a sort of slow bewilderment, and as usual with him under quickened circumstances, he began to stutter.

"No, n-n. I—I'm r-ready when you are, L-leonore. I'm only going to see A-aphrodite."

"Please, Ollie. It's Kitty's and the Charlottenburg's day. Add the luster of an additional stag. Sierra will be coming home with us, won't you?"

Packed with dread, of ordeal, the eyes of Leonore and Sierra met and exchanged forebodings.

"Yes, stay, Oliver," interposed the Charlottenburg maliciously, "and give a few flapper sub-debs a look upon the town's most forbidden young man."

The smile which Leonore turned upon the Charlottenburg was one that her skeleton might have worn. The flesh of her cheeks appeared to shrivel and shrivel, the eye sockets showed their bony outline, and the structure of her teeth seemed to jut as if they were a plaster-of-Paris model of themselves.

"Don't let them tear you limb from limb, Ollie," she said. "Come, John and Sierra."

The soft young bodies of the hard young women for whom Gala Club existed pressed and milled about Oliver. He was suddenly conscious of them, free to mingle with them, touch their hips, lay upon them his own caressing quality, except that the Charlottenburg and Kitty were usurping him as their own.

The soft bodies milled past, and the hard white light of the brilliance of Kitty and the Charlottenburg beat down, tiring and exhausting him.

God save him from clever women. He wondered why Leonore, who in certain ways seemed softer than any of the very young women here, had let him down in this manner. What was she up to, anyway? There was a strangeness to her these days.

His gaze wandered out into what seemed a jungle of lush youth. Girls with no breasts and slim swaying thighs, provocative eyes and flesh that would be tender to touch. He realized, all at once, that he had never been actually at large among their fruity loveliness.

With Leonore gone he felt suddenly free to mingle among them. But there were Kitty and the Charlottenburg, wanting to show him the Silver Bar and the Clubby Room and the frieze of Aphrodite.

The young girls moved past in droves. They were the postwar daughters of the uneasy mothers who trusted, they knew not what, in Kitty and the Charlottenburg. They were the little postwar girls of postwar-profiteering fathers, with bold eyes, rolled stockings and bold hips. He wanted to touch them.

But Kitty and the Charlottenburg, stunned with having him in their sole possession, were bent upon the Silver Bar.

His eyes hurt, as if from the glare of the two ladies out of Twenty-one East.

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## CHAPTER XXV

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LEONORE often deplored that the dining room in the house in Murray Hill was of such proportions that it dwarfed a mere family circle, giving the table the effect of a small island occupied by a marooned group that had been washed ashore out of the vast sea of surrounding room.

Of banquet-hall proportions, it represented hash-slinging Mamie Trehane's dream of what a dining room should be. It should never have been used except for functions, and large ones at that. Its central chandelier of fifty-two arms flooded the island of table, but filled the outskirts of the room with desolate grays that packed the corners with shadow.

Three at dinner in this room needed only to hoist a flag to give the effect of signaling a passing ship. The food which came up by dumb-waiter from a basement kitchen was borne across at least forty-five feet of intervening carpet.

"Grouse, and not gruel, should be eaten in such a room," Leonore declared.

But just the same, huddled to the center of all this immensity, John ate gruel for his evening meal, and two soft-boiled eggs with soda biscuit crumbed into them.

It was the evening meal which, after a long course in trial and error, had proved best suited to his growingly unpredictable

digestion. Leonore was meticulous in her instructions about the eggs, which were to be started in cold water and instantly removed at boiling point. Leonore and John, breathlessly intent, could tell, as the knife edge cracked down onto the shell, whether egg consistency compatible with John's digestive processes had been achieved.

The evening Leonore found herself faced with her long-deferred and anguished decision to acquaint John with the cataclysmic fact that she intended to leave his literal board and his figurative bed, her hot and hurting eyes darted with characteristic and automatic concern to the cracking of his egg. To her satisfaction, which was little more than a reflex, the shell parted and the egg, properly colloid, dropped to the cup, softly amenable to her husband's digestive processes.

"Just right, dear?" She asked this seven evenings a week, not only in the manner, but in the state, of concern.

"Just right, my dear."

With Oliver so unwontedly absent, and himself so pleasantly at peace after the extravaganza of the opening of Gala Club, a feeling of his home, his wife, his daughter, flowed around John's tiredness, erasing the complete befuddlement with which he never failed to regard the doings of the women of Twenty-one East. They tired him to his bone and sinew. Even Sierra, calm as a face carved out of mountain rock, and who in many ways was less revealed to him than were Kitty and the Charlottenburg, carried with her intimations of Twenty-one East, and even though he knew she had no part in it, intimations of Gala Club, too.

All women, in order to be lovely, he contemplated, as he dipped spoon into gruel already sweetened and creamed by his wife, should have the well-balanced ingredients of Leonore. Lush to a man's hand. Her breasts were still tender. You were still conscious of Leonore's thighs. Quiet, gentle as the dove. Alert to leadership in others, desiring none of it for herself. A woman to light a man's pipe for him. If she did not lie contentedly in his bed—ah well—ah well—there began the barren wastelands of John Baldwin's inner life.

"By God, I believe those women are going to strike pay dirt with those shenanigans," he remarked at table.

"They're smart. They make the average man look small by comparison."

Leonore said this almost reflexly. In the very act of casting John off, the instinct to impress him with her femaleness became her device.

The thought came over her, sitting there at that table, scooping up forkfuls of French peas, swallowing them through a throat so constricted that she sometimes held them in her mouth waiting for the power to gulp them down, that she herself must be made of cast iron.

It seemed to her that, if she were alone, her fingernails would tear rents down her clothing, and even down her body's flesh. She could have bitten a finger through, and it seemed to her that relief, rather than pain, would result. A woman who was not ruthless did not play her last card easily. And this was her last card. In fact, it was the only trump card she had ever held, although time and time again she had thought she held one.

Nothing, in all her desiring years, she was realizing, had been as she had planned and dreamed; not one ambition had ever fully borne fruit; not one period of happiness had come out of all the lifetime of scheming and conniving. And now, tonight, she was playing the last card at the last possible period of her life. To be sure, she had at least won financial security from Baldwin. It remained for her to wrest happiness. The years were so few and so precious, for the salvaging process. It was all she could do to control herself during the brief meal. There was no time to lose. She had never felt so hurried, so agonized with a sense of compulsion, as if by the time she reached her mirror, rigor mortis to her youth would have set in. Youth! Why youth was not fleeting any longer. Youth was gone!

All she could bank on now, at best, was a faint afterglow of sunset in which to warm herself during the chilling years. Those remaining years of her destiny lay on this table tonight, as if they were chops and French peas on her plate. They lay, too, beneath the quiet eyes of her strange stepdaughter, and the unsuspecting and kindly eyes of her husband.

She was about to cast out the future of her security here, for the kind of mess of pottage for which she was literally starving. There was no longer an alternative. One after another the

bonds of her restraints had snapped, and now she was at the frantic mental stage of figuring that she had nothing to lose no matter what! Come what might! This was her last grasp for the ring as the carousel spun!

No woman who was old in spirit she told herself, could bring her life sharply and of her own volition to this crisis.

What could this old fellow, a miner at heart, know, especially as impotences of every sort closed down upon him, of the fine raging turbulence of her aliveness. Thank God, in spite of these stagnant years as his wife, those forces were still torrential within her. She had tried to quiet them beneath his roof, but they had burst their bonds.

She looked at Sierra placing her dessert spoon, without so much as a tink, beside her plate, touching her napkin to the quiet corners of her quiet mouth, gazing with her saddened and foreboding eyes upon the figure of her father slumped over his childish meal. What could this woman know, except from the spectator side of a desk in Home House, of these desperate agonies of the spirit, and yes, of the body? She, or her colleagues in Twenty-one East? But were they normal? On that, Leonore had pondered considerably and had reached her own conclusions. Had even fumbled into such books as Jung's and two by Havelock Ellis, and one or two she kept covered in homemade paper jackets.

What must a man like Oliver feel before the high-power efficiency of their kind? He must hate the bright, the steely and the sterile in such women. Even though she had never borne, up to the stage of a successful delivery, and although her fertile years were past, she could never be sterile in the sense that they must be. She was a man's woman, had lain with three husbands, and would lay with a fourth, with whom, incredibly, her first genuine ecstasy awaited her. She was sure of that. She, Leonore, in her fifties, was emotionally a virgin, yet to be awakened. It was not too late! But she must catch up time sharply, by the forelock. The hot waves which overtook her at this point were not, she passionately told herself, the flushes of menopause. They were waves of compulsion. Time by the forelock! If Sierra did not help to make it easy, then with the prerogatives born of desperation, she must take the reins.

The large dark eyes of her stepdaughter, as if taking in the

terrible urgency of her own, focused in their lambent stillness, upon Leonore.

"All right, I am going to talk to Father now, Leonore."

Sierra's voice, steeled and without tremolo, reminded Leonore, through all her state of panic, of a surgeon with his instruments laid out, ready to operate on one of his own.

It was at a period in John Baldwin's incipient and as yet undiagnosed creeping paralysis when his perceptions came slightly delayed.

"What say?" he asked, cupping his ear and glancing in quiet askance at Leonore rising from her invariable drapes. "What say, Sierra?"

"I'll be back presently, when you and Sierra send for me," said Leonore in her terribly tightened voice, feeling her way out along the chair-backs. She was afraid she would fall in her tracks, and once clear of the dining room, she leaned against the wall for the strength to proceed upstairs. Inside her room, she closed the door and flung herself across her bed with her face buried deeply into a pillow, before Sierra had time to place her hand over her father's and launch into her ordeal.

"Father, you are still in good physical trim, which entitles you to reckon with good years ahead, and I want you to bear that in mind every second during what I've got to say to you."

A rattle of unease moved across his face, as if he were straining to understand beyond what he heard with his ears.

"Is something wrong, daughter?"

"Something we must meet and adjust."

"She—can't—hold—out——?"

"Oh, Father, then you've *known*!"

The pain of that smote her to the core. To be sure, it must have lessened his shock, but the thought of his long years, of long days and long nights of having known, twisted her.

"I knew it so soon after. In fact I almost knew it before."

"Then why, Father—did you——"

"Half a loaf of her has been better than no loaf."

"Oh—poor Father——"

"I have been content. I have been glad for my crumbs. They keep me alive."

"I thought——"



"I know, and I preferred that you think that way, and Leonore, too. But I knew. I'm glad that I knew. I could even tolerate him all the easier, because without him, my pretty bird could not have survived this long tedium of life with me. She *is* my pretty bird, daughter. My good and pretty bird. Without her it will be hard to face what is left of my life. It is only a matter of time. Tell her that, daughter—to hold out."

"But, Father, let me tell you how things stand."

"I have been prepared almost since our beginning. Yet I always knew, when it did come, I—I would not have the strength."

"Oh, Father, not even under these conditions! Isn't it better to—to let her go ——"

He slumped in his chair, his voice almost as gently monotonous as his daughter's.

"I have been preparing for this. I am letter-perfect to meet this hour, now that it has struck. Call the pretty bird. She need not be afraid."

"But Father, you must first let me tell you the inside tragic story of Leonore's decision ——"

"Am I supposed to show surprise?"

"You mean—you knew!"

"When a pretty bird like mine is caught in the dangerous net of being in love with her stepson, her decisions must be made by those who love her. I will never release her to him. I have watched him in my home and in my business, because his silly existence has become the greatest danger in my life. He is as feeble as his wrists, which can hardly hold the cups of tea she prepares for him. He is as languid as his body, which, God forgive her, is what my small bird would lie with, only to awaken to a day of reckoning for which I do not propose to release her."

"Do you want her that much, Father?"

"Yes, by God. She is like that. One wants her."

Like what? Sierra found herself asking herself. Presumably like everything she, Sierra, was not. Everything that the Charlottenburg was not. And Kitty. Like what? Oliver would know like what. Leonore's two previous husbands, who had possessed her little more than John Baldwin had possessed her, had known. What do men see in her, asked the baffled women who speculated concerning Leonore; asked Sierra, sitting there, seeing her father

suffer like a small dog that has been run down and left on the roadside to squirm. As well ask, what did Leonore see in Oliver? What, for that matter, did Kitty see in him, did the Charlottenburg, did—did the three of them who, sure as fate, went to bed, night after night, in Twenty-one East, with awareness of Oliver tucked into their consciousness.

“Call Leonore, daughter.”

This was so far from what she had expected, although for the life of her she could not have told you exactly what it was she had expected, that her eyes continued to rest fascinated upon the figure of her father.

During all the years he must have been preparing for this circumstance. It had not caught him unawares. He was braced and ready. Apparently even a little relieved that at last his inevitable hour had struck and consequences were at hand.

The torture of her own emotional incertitude gripped her hard. Was it easier for her, now that her father seemed about to hold Leonore to her thralldom? Of course it was. She had come to this difficult hour resolved to face the pattern of this situation as dispassionately as she faced similar ones daily at her desk in Home House. Her sense of immense personal relief that her father was to remain Leonore’s problem, and that Oliver would remain in the public domain of unattached male, must have no place here!

“But, Father, Leonore is as definite about all this as you are. She is of a cautious temperament. If she weren’t, there might be some way to put her back into the bottle and ram down the cork again. But this is an entire lifetime of suppressions, exploding.”

“She’s mine.”

“Father, does it mean more to you to keep her than to give her what she thinks is her last chance for happiness? She has given you much.”

“That is why—I can’t—” he said feebly, and began to cry.

She sat in the desolation of watching him, holding herself away from touching his grief for fear she might be swept away on her own.

“Father—don’t!”

“I’m not,” he said, dashing his hands against his eyes.

They sat in silence after his crying spell had passed and dried.

“There can be no happiness for you with Leonore after this,

Father. To be able to achieve it for another is not given to everyone. There is solace in that. I know whereof I speak. Oh, Father, I know whereof I speak. I've had no other kind except vicariously —through the happiness of others. But that," she put in hastily, "is beside the point."

He looked at her with his poor and so recently tearful eyes. The eyes of an old dog.

"That's been your trouble, always placing yourself beside the point."

His sympathy had the casual quality her casualness invited, but she warmed herself at his remark as if it had been a blaze.

"I suppose I'm the kind of person destined to dwell beside the point of real living. We girls who exist on the substitute foods of happiness soon learn that."

"Heigh-ho," he sighed out, as if coupling on another bothersome train of thought. "Godalmighty, what a world! You and your sister. The one buried away there, down under ——"

"Florence is happy enough, Father."

"You floundering around here with two strange flounders. Heigh-ho, to what end!"

From the wasteland of his spirit, his empty eyes seemed to survey an empty scene. He had the look of a blind man looking toward a dead sea with dead eyes. It seemed almost kinder to steer him back to the tumbled scene of his own plight.

"Father, there is an end that matters, and it has not entirely to do with personal happiness. The happiness of others can create a sort of impersonal happiness in those who are destined to miss it for themselves. It can, Father. Believe it from one who has missed it for herself. Father, aren't there compensations for you in surrendering to Leonore these years that she thinks are going to yield her hap ——"

"Goddam it, there aren't!"

"—I said 'thinks,' Father."

"No. I've thought it out through years of nights and days. I've seen him fastened onto her life like a louse. Onto mine. Onto our winters and our summers, our springs and our autumns. I don't mind that I've been a laughingstock. I've given him house room, office room; but by God, they haven't had bed room. I've seen to that. I know that! I've telegraphed it into their bones and their

brains so that they know it without knowing that they know it. They haven't dared that!"

"Try to see their pitiable-ness, Father. Their terrible pitiable-ness."

"She can have her lap dog, but by God, her lap dog can't have her. He doesn't want her. He'll have her if he must, but he'd like to jump his collar if he dared. You're not going to pay for what's left of her life with yours. That's what it will mean. You'll be tied by a sense of duty, right back to me, your old man. She's no more pitiable than I am. Than you are. Than life is. She mustn't leave me alone. I'm an old man and she's precious to me. So much has been terror and terrible in my life. Let me have her. I'm pitiful, daughter."

She flew to his side.

"Father, Father, not you alone. We're all that. The tired people in the streets, the tenement mothers, their children, the soldiers who died, the soldiers who didn't, the rushing masses, the pitiful classes doing their strut, you, me. The Charlottenburg. Kitty. Florence, Erna. Leonore thinks lying out there, in her years ahead, are the things she's missed in all the long years. She's past middle life and wants to scoop up a bit of happiness before the end. Isn't that pitiable, Father? You've more stamina for your suffering than Leonore has, Father. More—dignity. We're starvelings, most of us. But some are more pitiable than others. Still others have the power to generate from within. Peace and the things that lead to faith——"

"I'm not full of God. I wish to God I could be. I want to be. I've tried to live that way. But, dammit, I'm a man. Her stepson shan't have her—dammit—dammit—call her down!"

There was no need. Pale with her inability to endure it up in her bedchamber, Leonore, as if a wraith had wound down the stairs, was in the doorway. Fear trembled in her legs, but she kept the sweetness of her gaze, tender with anguish for him, unswervingly upon the figure of her husband.

"Come in," he said to her. His fingers strummed, but so did they usually.

She walked in, close to the wall, the back of her hand trailing it.

"Sit down," he said, indicating the chair she had occupied at table.

Like an automaton she plumped there, making sure with her startled eyes that the servant she herself had ordered to withdraw when she went upstairs, was not about.

"Shall I go, Father?"

"No," they both replied, simultaneously. There was nothing collapsed about Baldwin now. He was a businessman at a conference table.

"I am not going to bite you. I am going to treat you as if you were crazy. By God, life has given me lessons in craziness. You are in the custody of those who are sorry for you, because you are crazy."

"Don't talk to me like that, John. I haven't deserved it from you."

"No, pretty bird. That is why I am going to treat you gently, as if you were crazy, because that is what you are, to want this thing with this man, at your age. At any age."

"You ——"

"I have given you everything but bed room with him. Be content. No old man can be expected to give his sugar darling more than that."

Battened back against her chair with a kind of stupefaction at the running monotony of his talk, its restraint somehow portentous, she found herself wishing for the more usual pattern of this kind of hateful situation. There was nothing to control here because it was already under control. But the quiet had shape. Like a cage.

The scene about to take place in this room must insure her, please God—Oh, please, please God—against a future in this room. A future of John eating porridge at this table. Three-minute eggs—three-minute eggs—three-minute eggs, goddam all three-minute eggs from here to eternity. Crazy, eh! Crazy, eh! Keeping alive a husband! Good God, was this madness! No—no—no! One kept steady. Sierra was steady. Her steadiness steadied this terrible hour. One kept sane. One kept knowing that somehow, some way, walking into this room now was to insure her, please God, please, *please* God, against a future of John eating porridge at that table, herself and Oliver, night after night after night, sitting by, sitting by, her muted desires held under, her eyes careful.

So John had seen through her! All those night-after-nights when

she had followed him to his bedchamber, trembling to hurry back to Oliver, had been simulation wasted!

So he had known! And wearing his beatitude like a mask, had peered through it with seeing eyes at the spectacle of his wife and her stepson. Terrible meek of an old man, he had known, and seen her suffer and let her suffer and would continue to let her suffer—unless!

There was a cluster of sharp fruit knives lying beside a bowl of oranges and pears. They had pearl handles and a fine tracery of engraving along their steel blades. They shone. One of them, dipping into his tired and tough old flesh, in this battle for her remaining years, would—she wrenched her mind away, but it sprang back like a rubber band released. She had wished him out of the way for so long now, pitying him, and in her strange and complicated way, even loving him. That old hide of his would resist the steel, even as he was resisting now. Old crocodile—old crocodile. But almost simultaneously her anger shattered to bits. He was so hopelessly gray, sitting there so hopelessly needing the brightness she could bring to him. She began to cry.

Gazing with anguish upon anguish, gratitude that her father had freed her from any decisive part in this battle for the years rose in Sierra. She sat with her hands folded like those of a nun, but she could feel them beating, like throbs in a headache.

“John, are you going to be like that!” cried Leonore, her despair mounting against the unassailable front he had erected.

A calm, prepared, rigid old gentleman, his eyes as empty of hope as they were of despair, regarded her dilemma as she lay practically sprawled at his feet, her draperies spread fanwise. Almost any reaction were easier for Leonore to cope with than this chilled control.

“Dear, dear John, Sierra has told you—that I—can’t go on ——”

He continued to look down at her fanlike sprawl, his lower lip a dry, pursed-out shelf.

“Get up,” he said, “and behave yourself.”

If he had said, “Your face is dirty. Go upstairs and wash it,” she could have been no more stripped of her dignity or more feebly equipped to face his unpredictable behavior. And she began to use the sole weapon she could command, her tears.

“John, you simply can’t treat me like this! I’ve committed no

crime. No one is to blame. Least of all, you. What is, is. Not even Sierra sees it your way, or she wouldn't be here. Would you, Sierra? Sierra, make your father see! Make him see! Make him see!"

"There is nothing to see but a woman who is a fool and a fool who is a woman, and who happens to be my wife. And that you'll remain, my bird! I want you even on these terms. I want you too much to release you to that pup on a string. Keep him on your leash, if you must, but here on your own hearthstone. You'll starve on one of his providing."

"That's for me to worry about."

"No, it isn't. After you've squandered on him what you've managed to get out of me—and you've managed well, my bird—you'll look to me, or to Sierra, or anybody who will listen to the chirp of a pretty bird. Oh no, life isn't for you to worry about. You've the faculty, my pretty, of making it worry about you. That's what I'm doing now, and that's why you stay here, where you belong, with me."

"Sierra," she called, as if across a distance, "make him stop being like that! This isn't a matter of life or death, John. It's a matter of living death. Have you told him, Sierra —?"

"I know more than Sierra. I know that for years before you clapped eyes on me, you were living a lie with your stepson. If you had had the guts to sleep with him, you would know by now what you are willing to throw over the rest of your life in order to find out. You would know what any man with eyes in his head can tell at one glance about Plow. No, by God, I won't give you up to this pale-faced pup who doesn't even lick your hand as if he were man enough to have zest for it."

"John, if you don't let me tell you—why I can't live it out with you—if you don't let me tell you, I—I'll kill myself—I'll —"

"No you won't. Hush! There comes the meaning of life. Hear it? Nice noise? It's the pale pup's key in the lock. You're not accustomed to having him out of the house and it's upset your nerves. Here is stepson! Now we're all right. Come, my bird, ease the old man off to bed, sweetly, as always. Then back, my bird, in your soft things, to the pale pup who licks the hand that feeds him, but without vigor."

The footsteps of the returning Oliver were just outside in the hall.

"To bed, my bird," said Baldwin, rising and holding out his hand. "To bed, my bird."

She followed him, in her soft things.



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## CHAPTER XXVI

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BY THE time the dull hair at Erna's temples had begun to gray, and thus add a hint of distinction to a face hitherto entirely lacking in it, the dresser in the tiny room she still occupied in Twenty-one East had photographs on it of eleven nieces and nephews. These, in matched frames, ranged from naked babies, to children with toys, to a high-school graduate holding his new diploma.

Some of them carried a suggestion of the Charlottenburg cast of face and feature. But taken all in all, they were a consistently undistinguished looking lot of youngsters, breathing and mentalities thwarted by adenoids.

Their photographs stood among the pretty litter of ivory-and-silver dressing set that Kitty had given Erna one Christmas, chiefly because Erna entertained the idea there was something traditional and suggestive of "background" about family photographs scattered about.

Her eyes seldom rested on any of them. Once when Erna was in bed with one of her severe and homely head colds, Kitty, on a visit to the room at the top of the house, had remarked: "What litters of pasty faces your sisters beget, Erna, if ladies can be said to beget."

Far from taking exception, Erna had replied, "Ugh, yes."

"I could do better myself," pursued Kitty, running her ivory-

and-silver gift comb to Erna through her own ashen hair, which had grayed imperceptibly and which she had worn shorn for all those years preceding the then current fashion inaugurated by Irene Castle.

Thereafter, when by chance Erna's eyes lingered on the line of photographs adorning her dresser, she pondered, not upon her nieces and nephews, but upon that chance remark of Kitty's. What kind of children would she herself, Kitty, Sierra, the Charlottenburg, have had! Too late to speculate on that now, but nevertheless, she did speculate.

But what actually had come to occupy the major waking thoughts of Erna almost to obsession was the terrible conflict of her hatred and her infatuation for her aunt, the two states of mind so constantly merging and flying apart that the battle of emotions was written by now in strain and tenseness across her face.

Years of private aggravation, high winds of suppressed excitements, all sorts of borderland passions of which she was not aware, had weather-beaten and brow-beaten her face into its kind of premature rigidity.

Bony prairie women with faces set against dry winds and monotony have that look. It was a face that squinted from the bright glare of personalities, and which tightened, as if twisted by a monkey wrench, with every inner aggravation and frustration.

But most of all it was the Charlottenburg, who by very virtue of her being had come, over the span of years, to have the power to tighten that face and keep it taut and tired.

That part of the time when the excitement of her admiration for her aunt was not rocking her, it seemed to Erna that her detestation of the Charlottenburg was a strange and major emotion, not classifiable. Ignorant of the implications that went with her melee of emotions concerning her aunt, she only knew that beneath all of her extravagant feeling she was roiled most of the time, and that out of it a layer of hate, firm as ice, had formed.

I despise her, she would say to herself in the mirror, between gritted teeth: I despise the ground she walks on, she would repeat, and regard her pastiness in the looking glass, and in some inverted way, blame it and her lackluster hair and eyes on that profane Buddha, her aunt.

She has sucked my life's blood. Except for her (although here, occasional sense of injustice smote her) I would probably be married to Rolfe and have a brood of my own. She drains away one's vitality and personality. She has taken my youth and my ambition and my personal life and put them into the meat machine, to be ground up for her casserole. She devours with that immense personality of hers, just as she devours with that gourmet's palate of hers. She took me young and tender. Look at me now—dry—finished ——

As a matter of fact, there had never been a moment in the life of Erna when the sap ran high. She might have been any of the nieces and nephews ranged along her dresser top.

And yet over the years, for everything her life lacked, as well as for its brighter side, in fact for everything her experience contained, she alternately blamed or blessed Charlottenburg.

These moods flashed in and out of her, like lightning, causing alternate amusement and concern in Twenty-one East.

"My niece is a prude, but she wears her premature change of life on her sleeve."

"Don't fool yourself, your niece's chronic state of change of life is due to her choice of aunt. You changed her life from the moment she chose us for playmates instead of Pimple Boy for bedmate."

"Bah, hers was foreordained to be a stale life. Tragedy roosts in lives worthy of it. She can never be more nor less than wretched, in her small way. Plunge a rapier through Erna's emotional gizzard, and her reaction will be a long face. Whereas you, my Kitty—so much as prick your thumb with a needle, and you bleed charmingly and tragically to death. Beautiful blood, cold, but ruby-red."

A recurrent condition, medically and humiliatingly diagnosed as "hives," was the result of Erna's alternating state of aggravation and hero-worship. It splotched her skin after a crying spell and inversely, after a particularly exhilarating interview or excursion with her aunt, she would likewise find herself the victim of the same unsightly splotches.

"You're bad for me," she burst out on more than one occasion. "I'd have been better off an ugly duckling among ducks, than I am among such strange swans who must despise me. Not Kitty

or Sierra. But you, aunt. If Mother were living, I'd go back. Wilmington is more my stature. The lives of any one of my sisters or brothers, snide as they are, are more my stature."

This small explosion, which took place in the Charlottenburg bedroom one late evening, had many antecedents.

They occurred usually at the fag end of an exacting day, and could be set off by a casual or willful remark from the Charlottenburg, who was not above the latter.

The one person permitted to follow the bulk of the Charlottenburg into the actual processes of going to bed (and complicated processes they were) was Erna, who by now had become indispensable to the procedure of helping the increasingly unwieldy figure out of its clothing.

Undressing the Charlottenburg, which was more like breaking camp, was such a highly special performance. What with a leg brace to manipulate and girders to hold the abdomen, Erna had not taken more than a brief vacation in years, although her indispensability compensatingly required that she accompany her aunt on all trips, business or otherwise.

The Charlottenburg disclaimed her indispensability, but during one of Erna's brief absences to visit a married sister in Wilmington, her aunt had fallen in the bath, twisting an abdominal ligament that was responsible for the heavy rubber girders she had worn ever since.

It was chiefly during these procedures of the toilette that the Charlottenburg could not subdue her pixie impulses to prod her niece in those spots which she knew to be her most vulnerable.

Tears in the pale strained eyes of Erna aroused in the Charlottenburg a kind of sadistic perversity that was but slightly tempered with mercy. Sometimes it was an hour, again a full day, before she would restore the distracted Erna, who never seemed to learn that her ostracism was temporary, back into her favor.

Charlottenburg displeased, or ironic, or faultfinding, reduced Erna to the state of tears that only served to invoke more and more willfulness from her aunt.

"Great cream-colored St. Christopher, it's a blessing you never married. You're a bull in the china-shop-of-the-bedroom. Some women elect to be spinsters, never mind what I did. Others are that way by nature, never mind by what I'm that way. Others

remain spinsters after a lifetime of wedlock. You were already spinster when the cutting of your umbilical cord took place."

"As usual, I belong in the obnoxious department of your classification."

"As usual, you nominate yourself for it."

"Aunt, how can you abominate me so! No wonder I abominate myself."

"Must you abominate yourself merely because I happen to?"

"Yes. That's what you do to me, and you know it."

The Charlottenburg stretched out her leg, its immense stocking encircled below the knee by round garters, which Erna, shaking with sobs of anger, started to tug.

"Let my garters alone! What a fool you are, Erna."

"All right! A fool I am, a plain nearsighted, dyspeptic fool. That's what you've made of me."

"Come now, child-of-my-sister, God did some of it."

"Well, if he did, he made you cruel, too. He didn't wreak all of his vengeance on me."

"You don't believe all that of your old aunt?"

"I wish to God I did. I'd be better off. I'd be free!"

"Why, Ernie, free of your goddam ole sour puss of an aunt! Now why? Hasn't she been good for you?"

"I don't know, I don't know. You—you've emptied me of myself."

"Just what was there to empty you of?"

The bodice removed, the great breasts, as she put the quizzical question, slid downward onto the released contour of her abdomen. In the light of her table lamp, her face all oblique from trying to keep it straight, she was Buddha in mischievous mood.

"Oh, nothing, I suppose," cried her put-upon niece, after the manner of a mouse looking for some hole of egress. "I'm not pretending that there ever was much. But whatever little it may have been, you've got it."

The Charlottenburg leaned forward and tugged off her small shoes. Squatting there in her short stockinged legs, her haunches spread around her like melting wax.

"You little idiot! You had your choice and made it. Stop belly-aching. If any one thing good ever happened to you, I'm it."

"Or anything bad! You're bad for me, I tell you. You keep me at fever heat."

"What a hell of a fool you are! I told you that in the beginning, when you had your chance. Of course you'd be better off nursing your female trouble between babies, in a boxcar, as a surveyor's wife. You'd even be better off starving your sex cravings by taking dictation from a handsome boss who wouldn't even try to make you."

"That's right, rub it in!"

"Take it on the chin or keep it shut. That's probably what devastates you about your goddam old aunt. She can take it. You're a sniveler and the sight of those who don't snivel is sandpaper to your guts."

"What is it you can take! One good break after another? Is that so hard to take? People know that you exist. You're an institution. You and Kitty are somebodies on your own and Sierra, too, in her special way. That's why you despise me! You've done all this for yourself. You're a dowager queen looking down at a slab-sided cat, and that cat's me."

Emerging from the scrupulously fresh white muslin nightgown, which Erna was manipulating over her head, the Charlottenburg met her eye to eye.

"You bigger-fool-than-I-thought! You've a ringside seat in the dreariest house in New York, and what do you see! You see less than any little society squirt or hoofer who comes here because for the moment it's the fashion to come here, or because we hold out the bait of good food and drink, or the bait of the momentarily right people for whom we twist our gizzards in order to get them to come to Twenty-one East, for reasons known as business."

"I know all that. But you've made something of yourself. You've the brains and the personality, and people are impressed ——"

"You dumb cluck. You idiot! This is a house of the female bankrupts. This is a refuge of wombs that are tombs. The sarcophagus of the unborn, the unrealized, the unpropagated. We are the mothers without children; the women without bedfellows; the wives without husbands; the harlots without lovers; the three vices who have never sinned. We are houses that have never been lived in. When we sit down, we make laps that have never been rocked in. We are the women to whom no husband returns at night, for whom no child cries, for whom no family waits at win-

dows, needs when ill, returns to when defeated. We are the nose wipers of the children of other mothers, the breeding ground of strange desires, unrequited satisfactions, nervous disorders. If you were the daughter of someone less dumb than my sister, you would smell the mausoleum known as Twenty-one East. It is the smell of lifelessness. Women with dry breasts and dead loins live in this house."

"Aunt, for God's sake, there are some things that just aren't said."

"That's why I'm saying them, for fear they'll never get to you otherwise. I wish to God I had been firmer with you that time Tommy Adenoids was wooing you. Fourteen kids in a boxcar, even with female trouble thrown in, has its points."

"Must you, Aunt, talk like an abattoir?"

"Apparently, in order to make sense to you. This much you've learned here. There comes that moment when you close the door on the last guest. This goddam house is filled with women who close the door on their last guest. You. Me. Kitty. Sierra. Kitty's worldliness. Sierra's sanctity. My whatchamacallishness. Your tire-someness. We're all in the same boat. A goddam leaky aimless one, of no particular destination."

"But, Sierra ——"

"I know. I know. Sierra is her own reward. God knows, she is. To be Sierra must be to walk in high places. I don't know much about it up there where Sierra dwells, but I do know this. It's one thing to mother the world. It's another to have even one puny brat of your own born out of your own womb. Climb up if you aren't afraid of high places, and look into Sierra's heart. There will be a lot of empty space there—empty as hell."

"What are you trying to tell me, Aunt? That it's chilly to be good?"

"Hell, no. I'm merely trying to tell you that women with loins and breasts and passions that have never functioned realistically are dangerously close to being nature's deadwood."

"They do say of you ——"

"I know. They say of us that we are ladies of strange feather who flock together. Of course we do, huddling for warmth, but the rest of the implication is a goddam damned lie. At least it's a damned lie so far as we know. It seems to me we're as normal as

spinach. What I don't know about my pathology, whatever that is, doesn't bother me."

"When they talk that way—about this house—I—I could kill."

"Hold your horses. Any way you look at it, you can't deny it's a strange borderland of experience to wander unmated in and out of the mating seasons of a lifetime."

"Sex isn't everything."

"Perhaps not. But try living life in a world that has everything but sex. Perhaps they're right. We are abnormal. We haven't got the game, but we deserve the name. Sierra hasn't really missed out all the way."

"Indeed she hasn't."

"Some women can conceive happiness immaculately. Sierra couldn't dispense it as she does without an inner reservoir of supply. I've seen those godawful panicked women at Home House live again because she has helped them to find their bootstraps and pull themselves up by them. But Kits! Your mauve-pawed darling is a goldfish out of water, flopping and panting to be in her own element, which is elegant respectability in some man's bed, that man being rich and husband."

"Oh, Aunt, you're so gross-mouthed it must be a pose!"

"Guess I'm what you'd call a rhinoceros out of water. And believe you me, that's a hell of a place for a rhinoceros to be. Don't laugh, but it's such a hell of a place that your ole aunt sour puss is out to find God, Erna. I mean *God*."

"Aunt, why should I laugh!"

"I'm going out in a big way after God. I remember a story I heard when I was in France during the war. The supply of sand near Vimy Ridge gave out, and in order to sandbag the trenches, soil was dug up from the gardens of an adjacent village and packed into the sacks instead. All during the winter of 1918, these dirt-filled bags barricaded miles of blood-soaked trenches. But lo, came spring, and suddenly the miles of trenches were lined in daffodils which had broken through the burlap! Resurrection in that story. God mixed up somewhere in it, and I'm going out in a big way after Him. You've no idea how close I'm coming to needing to salvage something of the meaning of life. Does it lie there, Erna? Does it help to be a lover of the Lord, if you want to go to heaven when you die, as they used to say in the



school hymn book? You at least go to church and follow your Presbyterian beginnings."

"I don't know, Aunt. I don't think a great deal about such things, except that it rests me to pray and believe. I do believe, Aunt."

"You've got something there. I've been thinking a lot lately. About the Catholic church ——"

"Aunt, but we're Presbyterians!"

"What does it matter what road you take? The Catholic church is sort of a scenic route. I like the face of the Catholic God. It has the light that somehow I've missed, and God, how I need a lead-kindly-light-in-my-bog."

"There is a God, Aunt."

"Here's a laugh line, coming from me. Lead me to Him. Lead me to Him, Erna."

"I ——"

"Tosh. I know. That's a road a fellow's got to scratch for alone. Ouch, what the hell! The hair you're combing happens to be attached to my scalp!"

"I'm sorry, Aunt."

"Yes, Miss Bellyache. The next time you get to grouching about life, rub a little of the guilt-dust out of your eyes. Do a little parsing of friend Kit and your fat aunt. We cater to the rich. We pawn off fads on the foolish. We swath our paws in lavender suede; we turn a clever dollar here and there, and cash in on the fairly dependable theory that Barnum was right. The world loves to be humbugged. Everybody is a hick at heart. A philosophy of life that would drive anybody to God, and that's where its driving your old Aunt Battle-Axe."

"But, Aunt ——"

"Now go along up to your room and snivel over my frustration along with your own. This is the first time I've had mine out for an airing. But it's there, goddam it. I go to bed with it night after night. And that's what I'm about to do now. Get out."

"Why, Aunt ——"

"Didn't realize the viper at my breast, did you! Never occurred to you that the old hippo-out-of-water might have cried enough secret tears to fill her hippo tank. Hand me that sack of jelly beans before you turn out my light. Sucking them helps me and my frustration to fall asleep. Now scat!"

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## CHAPTER XXVII

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**J**EAN-JACQUES would have told you what he had said repeatedly in the fashion columns, namely, that it was Kitty Mullane who was responsible for his American vogue. She had been the first to wear his knitted fabrics, so skillfully interwoven with metallic thread, for formal evening wear, thereby establishing a lightning and lucrative fad for his weaves.

As a result, Jean-Jacques had been dressing Kitty for years, keeping her gratis wardrobe in advance of each season's advanced styles, and thus achieving his reputation and her inclusion in "best dressed" lists of one sort or another.

Originally a Brooklyn boy, Joseph Shimsa Jacobs, to be exact, he had remained behind after the evacuation of the American expeditionary forces from France. His marriage to an ambitious little midinette, combined with his prewar experience in the Seventh Avenue wholesale dress zone in New York, had conspired to bring about his ultimate and first-water success in Paris.

Following the war and his marriage, the Paris house of Jean-Jacques had come up with meteoric brilliancy.

There was now a plan afoot between Jean-Jacques and Kitty that both were finding dazzling in its possibilities.

In fact, the young Jewish boy from Brooklyn, whose Paris establishment operated securely in the shrewd hands of his Parisian

wife during his absence in America, was so carried away by the pending idea of the New York adjunct to his business (Jean-Jacques-Mullane-Modes) that he had thrice canceled his return sailing, in his zeal to urge Kitty to conclusion of the alliance.

There were astute reasons for and against it. Repeated conferences in Twenty-one East, with and without the high-pressure presence of Jean-Jacques, had probed into every aspect of the contemplated partnership.

The evening of Jean-Jacques' thrice-postponed sailing, the subject was once more under animated discussion at the dinner table in Twenty-one East.

A pair of Georgian silver pheasants, beautifully designed, which she intended ultimately to place in a Long Island house she was decorating, dominated the center of Kitty's highly personalized table.

What Kitty herself proclaimed as her beautiful food, slid unrelished down the Jean-Jacques esophagus as the young importunist and opportunist who had been dining at this table constantly during his stay in the States, once more unloosed his suasion upon the three women around their board.

Here in Twenty-one East he did not indulge in an atavism which had endeared him to the Seventh Avenue garment trade, that of dropping his achieved French accent in favor of his native Brooklyn patois. Before the play-acting of this dainty design of a Kitty Mullane, who dined in mauve gloves and tinted her sheets and pillow cases the same tones, Jean-Jacques risked the sardonic gleam of Charlottenburg's eye and strutted the French accent he reserved for "the trade."

"You have made me *vairée* happy," he exclaimed, holding aloft the champagne which had been opened following Kitty's announcement of her decision to enter the long-discussed business alliance with him. "It has been worth missing zee boats. You will nevaire regret, Mademoiselle Kitty, you have cast your lot with Jean-Jacques. Jean-Jacques and Kitty Mullane will make fashion history in Amerique! I drink toast to Jean-Jacques-Mullane!"

"Darlings, I'm thrilled to the soul, now that I've finally decided," cried Kitty, lifting her glass and drinking her chilled Gordon Rouge. "It's terrible that you must sail tonight, Jean; I want to paint the town."

"I will wait over for zee next boat."

"No—no, you must get back for the openings. I'll see you in Paris next month. We'll do our New York salon in leopard skin and chamois, Jean. Every woman who enters it will feel waves of her own exotic personality sweep over her."

"How many waves of that will it require to sweep over all of me?" queried the Charlottenburg, sniffing. "I require quite a bit of wave coverage for my exotic personality, to say nothing of a fifty-four bust measure."

"There's that textile mill I was telling you about, in Passaic, Jean. If only you had time to go over with me! My man there is working on the chamoisette. Looks like chamois, drapes like satin, wears like iron. We'll also manufacture it in dress-weight, and call it 'Sauvine.' Oh, Jean, we're going to set the world on fire by being smarter than smarty-pants. Drink to us, girls! To Jean-Jacques-Mullane. Drink to us, darlings! Here goes twelve thousand hard-earned-and-borrowed American simoleons into Jean-Jacques-Mullane, Inc! I may as well tell you, Jean, that the Charlottenburg and Sierra, God love them, have loaned me half my investment, so what you've suspected all along was smart of you. We won't let them down, will we!"

"I should wish my own mother so good!" replied Jean-Jacques, a surge of emotion flooding out his accent.

"You're a damned lucky little yiddle," said the Charlottenburg, clicking her glass against his. "Everything Kitty touches turns to la mode. The mauve-pawed little hellion can't help it, but she's past-master at a profitable and meaningless commodity known as *chic*. You and your little French wife can drink your French borsch known as *petite marmite*, out of platinum soup plates from now on."

The ebullient Jean leaped to his feet and kissed the Charlottenburg smackingly on the cheek.

"Amazing woman! You are zee paprika to my life. I kees your hand. I salute your existence. I salute also Mees Baldwin. I salute thees most delicious of mad houses, Twenty-one East."

"You had better stick around a bit longer, Shimsa, and inhale some more of Kitty's ideas, unless you are afraid that two weeks more of mama's delicious gefüllte fish is going to reduce your accent to normal."

"Nevaire you mind my accents, Miss Charlottenburg. We will be reech."

"Never fear, I won't mind if we will be reech. It is eef we will not be reech, is hurting ole aunt Charlottenburg Sour Puss."

"Sierra, say something," cried Kitty, reaching her mauve hand across the table. "I can't bear it if you don't think I've made the right decision with regard to Jean-Jacques-Mullane."

"Your instinct is sounder than my judgment, Kits."

"For God's sake, stop the twitting of the love birds," cried the Charlottenburg. "We want it, don't we, Sierra, if Kits is going to make a go of it, and not run blating to your father or back to us because her capital investment has done a disappearing act."

"Sauvine will not let us down, Charlottenburg! Toast to Sauvine!"

"Good God, I'll likely be running around before the year is over, hung with chamois. Shimsa, when you get back to the Rue de la Paix, design your ole fat friend a shimmy made out of chamois. Or how about a toga?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle Charlottenburg, zee first model of zee new firm of Jean-Jacques-Mullane shall be La Toga."

"Toast to La Toga!"

The four glasses met and sparkled again. The Charlottenburg's forty-pound tortoise-shell cat, Europium, rose from its floor cushion, arched its back and opened its mouth in a yawn that looked like the laugh of a tiger. The maid, with whom Kitty still secretly shared so many of the household chores, entered then with a telegram on a small silver tray, which she offered to Sierra.

She read it almost with a sweep of the eye.

"It is from Leonore," she said finally, in a voice as quiet as slow cream pouring from a pitcher tilted by a steady hand. "She and Oliver are sailing tonight on the *Paris*."

"My boat!"

"She and Oliver have left Father. For good."

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

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THE Charlottenburg was fond of telling Rabbi Ben-Horwitz and Father Macklin, on those occasions when she invited these two favorites to lunch, that she believed in mixing her spiritual drinks, therefore her happy intimacies with apostles of many cloths. Both gentlemen of these particular cloths never failed to rise to this somewhat worn quip, Father Macklin usually lifting his glass of excellent Barsac and clicking it against the Charlottenburg's.

"Our abstemious friend, the Rabbi, misses the unmixed delight of your very fine Barsac, to say nothing of that very fine mixed drink Miss Kitty sometimes puts together for me."

"Our faiths mix well, Father Macklin," the Rabbi would reply. "That is as potent a thought as Miss Kitty's concoction is a potent draught."

"Right you are, Rabbi."

In contrast to the more priest-like rotundities of the Rabbi, Father Macklin's lean face and deeply scooped eyes suggested an ancient necromancer moving among the phials and vessels of the laboratory.

It was a good day, usually a Friday, that counted them guests.

The fish, trout or shad roe, according to season, personally marketed and prepared by Kitty, was Twenty-one East cuisine

at its excellent best. Kitty seldom attended these luncheons, preferring to consider them the Charlottenburg's own. But every item, from Father Macklin's favorite freshly salted almonds to the Rabbi's choice of cigar, was carefully superintended by her.

The Rabbi and the Priest invariably arrived whetted and ready for the anticipated perfection of the repast that was sure to await them. Even without the libations of chablis, deep-hearted sherry or cocktails that so warmed Father Macklin, the Rabbi also warmed to these occasions.

A Britisher by birth, an American by naturalization, an internationally recognized Talmudic scholar, the Rabbi now shepherded a large and influential reform congregation. The Sunday morning sermons, which packed his magnificent Byzantium edifice to its rafters, covered unorthodox texts from Bible to bibliography, from political science to drama to metaphysics, and attracted all sects and creeds.

By force of a sonorous spirituality, dramatic suasion and a deep-throated bell of a voice, he concealed beneath his urbane front the flaming Judaism of a man who had been mesmerized from the Talmudic retreat of his preference by popular demand for his lighter talents.

"The trouble with you, my dear Rabbi," the Charlottenburg once ventured to tell him, "is that you are a cross between a superb actor and an orthodox Reb in reform clothing. The long coat that should be flopping about your ankles, is tucked into your pants, and your long white beard into your shirtfront. You preach in the million-dollar synagogue your congregation has built for you on the most expensive real estate in the world, but your spirit still moans before the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem, which was built centuries before Fifth Avenue and surrounding island was bought for twenty-four dollars or so."

The Rabbi Ben-Horwitz fastened his necromantic eyes upon her.

"You are a strange mixture of the doctrines of the Hindu sage, Siddhartha—and ——"

"I know, Buddha! My fat tummy and my fat chins give the illusion."

"Just the same, you, my busy realist, strive for the present,

hope for the future, but back in your race-memory lurks a long memory of God."

"No wonder you pack them in, Rabbi. You say your doctrines more palatably than the average mealy-mouthed pulpiteer in that endless period before Sunday dinner, when pews punish posteriors and sermons go in one ear, and you know what, of the other. The truth of it on a silver plate is that you've dusted off doctrine."

"We'd prefer it on the collection plate, Miss Charlotte," guffawed Father Macklin, who loved to laugh loud and long.

"For two thousand years most of you fellows have been preaching without teaching. God still remains too much your secret, gentlemen. It's dark for those of us who can't find Him. It's dark for your fat friend. And cold. She's chilled to the gizzard. But enough of the state of my soul and my anatomy. I didn't mean to make you talk shop."

The two men remained silent, regarding her with new intentness.

"Speaking of shop, what you probably wouldn't hear in your world, although it has been in the press, is that an amusement syndicate has offered to buy outright Miss Mullane's nefarious Club Gala, at a profit as fat as I am. Provided, of course, that she will personally supervise and establish, also at a fat-as-I-am yearly salary, more Clubs Gala which they plan to establish in Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles. In other words, not out of the classics, nothing succeeds like success, and Kitty is success, succeeding. Thought you'd like to know that about the purveyor of your shad roe and salted almonds."

"What a woman!"

"And what a purveyor of shad roe!"

"Yes, but hear this one about me. It will offset the success saga of my friend, Mullane. If you two learned gentlemen of the cloth ever took time off to peruse the escapist sections of your daily metropolitan journals, you would see that your sour puss friend is one of the co-producers of the season's most colossal musical comedy failure, known as "Sylvia is Fair."

"Why, bless my soul, you forget, Miss Ames! You gave my nieces, Katy and Molly, passes for it. They've had the parish house humming ever since, with huzzas to Sylvia's fairness."

"Well, Sylvia's fairness cost old aunt sour puss fourteen thou-



sand bucks. But never you mind, gentlemen, your fat friend is going to recoup. I've about rounded up the backing to do a new show which I'm going to call "Girls and Boys." Youth, gentlemen. Brand-new youngsters, as fresh as daisies. New faces, new songs, new situations and new reputations. I'm out to collect from coast to coast the youngest, liveliest spring review the town has ever seen. We're going to scour the farms and the towns, the mountains and the valleys, for Americana that's going to make up the easiest-to-look-at review this town has ever seen."

"My nieces never miss a thing to which your name is attached. We're only sorry we didn't get to the opening of that modern art exhibition of your young Russian prodigy who is creating such a stir in the newspapers. But my friend, the Rabbi and I had the Williamstown conference that week, and business before pleasure."

"I guess the spiritual industry isn't augmented a great deal because Kitty Mullane makes a go of Gala House and I'm planning a boy-and-girl review. Neither, gentlemen, if I may say so, is the human race."

"There, Miss Ames," said Father Macklin, letting cool chablis wash down delicate trout, "is where I beg to differ with you. The human race, if not increased, is augmented."

"Gallantly spoken, Father. But the Church is concerned with more concrete forms of augmentation."

"That loss, where you and your colleagues are concerned, is not alone the Church's. It is humanity's and posterity's loss that you are not perpetuating yourselves. But we won't go into that."

"Why not, Rabbi? You modern churchmen allow us and yourselves fewer inhibitions than in the good old days. I used to sit on my little backside when the balls-of-the-feet of our minister, Dr. Snodgrass, used to pay us a visit. I say 'balls-of-feet' because that's exactly what he was to me. A couple of padding balls of feet, sneaking into Sunday and stinking it up with the odor of sanctity."

The Rabbi winked at his colleague.

"I sometimes suspect that Father and I bend too far backward and away from that good old school of carpet hassocks and the odor of sanctity and Scripture."

The Charlottenburg wheeled.

"There's something in what you say, my learned friend. I enjoy your lack of orthodoxy because I know you use it to break down the reminiscent barriers of those constipating Sunday dinners when a beanpole in a frockcoat and an Adam's apple got the best cuts of roast and lemon pie, and chased fun out of the window as he entered the parlor."

"It's worth one's life these days, Miss Ames, to get a good Sunday dinner under your cassock without having to play a game of baseball with the son of the house beforehand, or shinny down the banisters for the baby."

"I'm serious, Father. The further you men of the cloth encourage us to depart from paraphernalia and orthodoxy, the more you obscure the spiritual meanings. Give us the trappings. Jehovah in modern clothes loses his divinity for the run-of-the-mill of us. Imagine dressing Mother of God in a shirtwaist and skirt. I want the trappings, Rabbi. I want the Old Testament, Reb, in wrappings and windings. There is something even more unalterable in the orthodoxy of the Catholic church. There's the splendor of the King of Kings in the very vestments you wear, Father. They're soaked in the odor of God, which without them, becomes only stale incense and the sweaty bodies of parishioners. Father, help me find the splendor of God. Father, help me to help myself to go on with living Father, I need Him so!"

In the somewhat electrified pause, Father Macklin cleared his throat nervously.

"I could wish that those were true words only spoken in jest."

"But they are, Father. They are. They are! They are the truest your fat friend has ever spoken. Father, I'm lost along the way. Courage and peace and love and faith, and all the bright hopes of something ultimate, have fallen away."

"My child, there is totality in God. Approaching Him you approach totality."

"No, no. No abstruseness, Father! That talk rolls off me like water off a duck's back. I need desperately to be helped at this tardy hour of my gimcrack life. I'm scalawag through and through, Father. But find some way to help me. Not with tired old scriptural wordage. Words somehow camouflage God. If I'm not worthy of becoming Catholic, I'll sweat to be. Help

me, Father. I need it more than even you can know. Good God, what is ole sour puss saying! I've been a year preparing this approach to you, and now look what fat sock has done. Spilled the beans all over the place, and in the presence of the Reb, who has his own line of transportation to heaven. Reb, excuse ——"

The Rabbi rose to his height, his eye belying the forced casualness of his words.

"The true word seems to have leaked out of the jest, Father. God bless you both," he said, starting to depart, but pausing an instant before the Charlottenburg to look down at her face, so ludicrously puckered, and kiss the immense fold of her cheek.

"I'm tired, Father," she pursued without break following the Rabbi's exit, "I want a clean and rested soul. I want a scoured and brightened spirit. I want to serve the High and Mighty. I want to touch Faith. Kiss the hem. Look beyond the obscuring clouds. Give me the spiritual co-operation of the Church. Give me the primer. I'll begin on a hassock at your feet. G—O—D spells God. I need Him, Father. Father, sour puss needs Him."

During the long ensuing silence, the Charlottenburg continued to gaze with her oyster-size and oyster-colored eyes into those of Father Macklin.

"Cleanse me for the Church—your Church—Father."

"My child, it stands at the top of the hill, waiting and shining. Come."

"Father—help me ——"

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## CHAPTER XXIX

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THE committee that awaited upon the Charlottenburg the year of the formation of the Merger party was composed of three men and two women.

The group sat in a semicircle on Kitty's beautiful violin-backed chairs and faced the Charlottenburg whose immense sides overlapped her desk chair, her small feet dangling.

Fan-shaped wrinkles of amusement kept raying out from the corners of her eyes.

In the midst of being invited by this newly formed party, which was ultimately to come into power, to become first woman candidate in the city's history for the office of mayor, quirks of suspicious merriment danced at the ends of her mouth.

The Honorable Lee Bowles, insurgent and disgruntled Democrat, and cofounder of the Merger party, whose major and dubious claim to distinction lay in his resemblance to Warren Harding, was not alert to this, the discourse which he had previously rehearsed with his colleagues proceeding without interruption other than the loud and frequent clearing of his own bothered throat.

"... our conviction that the time is ripe for a woman candidate for mayor of our great city. This would not be possible if an arresting and vigorous person such as yourself were not at

hand. Your part in the civic life of the community, while not that of the politician, has been long and honorable. Your candidacy will not only focus the attention of the entire country upon our new party, but will serve to prove to our vast community that here at last is a party that disinterestedly wants the best man for the office, even though that man be a woman."

When the Honorable Lee Bowles delivered that last he sat back tasting the words, jerking his waistcoat and looking about at his committee, who nodded him affirmation. Then, gathering wind:

". . . Miss Ames, even though, as a figure well known in the social, professional, and civic life of our city, you have coveted no public office, you are, by very virtue of that fact, along with your outstanding gift for leadership, qualified for this grand opportunity. The city knows your milk-fund work, your drive for clean shows, your youth activities, your freedom where party affiliation is concerned. You are a Democrat, a Republican, a Merger, only when party behavior deserves it. We believe that Merger has something to offer you and that you will bring much to it. We do not pretend to say that the new party will not have to contend with the immense competition of the old guard. But that we will go into after we have sounded you out on your reaction to the initial idea. There will be the large problem of breaking down public opposition to the woman candidate. That goes without saying. But we are not afraid when we consider the caliber of the candidate we have chosen. A lady, a fighter, a personality. Such difficulties, Miss Ames, are meat to a party which has right on its side, and plans to have might there too. Miss Ames, we consider you Number One timber for the first woman mayor of this city. As chairman pro tem of the party which aspires to sponsor your candidacy, permit me to extend to you the invitation to become the Merger's candidate for mayor."

A spatter of applause broke from the assenting committee and the lower lip of the Charlottenburg moved forward into a shelf.

"That's a hell of an idea. Who pawned it off on you? This town may need a good five-cent cigar, but it certainly can get along, and will, if I have anything to say, without a she-mayor. Lee, I would have expected better, even from you, a disgruntled

Democrat. But as for your female colleagues! Ladies, don't try to wear the pants. You'll go much farther in your panties."

In the stunned silence the shelf of her lip shot out farther.

"Shocked? Vulgar ingrate, ain't I? Such a thing as carrying plain-speaking too far, ain't there? Excuse me, Lee, but that being the case, I'll just go a bit further. I'm not going to be a female cat's-paw to pull any political chestnuts out of the fire. I know more about what stinks in this shake-up than you yourselves. I know where the corpse that is causing the smell is buried! Smart, ain't I? Your fat friend has a nose, eh? Vulgar old peasant again? Excuse it, please. No harm intended, only truth. Did I hear anybody on the committee name the McCosker franchise, or did I just hear echoes. Eh, what?"

A Miss Radziwell, district leader, rose stiffly.

"I think we have Miss Ames's reaction," she said, and made toward the door.

"Sit down, Radzi, and hold your horses. You're too smart a politician to get yourself mixed up in this business. If I've sprained your dignity, I'm sorry. This would be a damned fine honor you are offering me, and if I didn't happen to know reasons that make it a damned fool and foul proposition, I'd be a damned fool for turning it down. One day the right woman and the right party and the right ideal are going to come along all at once for this job. One of the great secrets of the rhythm of living is timing. The time for a woman mayor of this town isn't here yet. Don't feature a show window of galoshes in August. For instance, I've been waiting five years to produce a new-wine-in-old-bottles-of-a-show in this town called, 'Boys and Girls.' I'm going to do it now because the time's ripe. It's not time yet, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, to put a woman forward for mayor of this city. She'll be chiefly a comic strip, not necessarily because she's comic, and not because she probably wouldn't do as good a job, and perhaps better, than the average stuffed shirt, but because your timing is bad. I'd like to be mayor of this town! I'd like to prove that city government can get free of dirty politics. I'd like to run this city in a big clean way. I'd like like hell to revolutionize city management. Maybe it will take a woman to do it. But not yet. Meanwhile, ladies, let's inch, not barge, our way."

The Honorable Lee Bowles dusted off his knees and rose.

"All you have succeeded in doing, Miss Ames, is to further convince us that you are the man for the office. We refuse, do we not, ladies and gentlemen, to return to headquarters with your final refusal."

"I move we draft the lady," said a thin city alderman who had been silent throughout the proceedings.

"At least you will agree to take the matter under consideration, Miss Ames. Meanwhile, those more eloquent than I will attempt to alter your present decision. What this town needs is that good five-cent cigar, plus Miss Charlotte Ames to blow rings around all previous administrations."

"Sierra," suddenly called the Charlottenburg, "is that you? Come in here a second. I want this group to meet the silent but significant member of Twenty-one East. Committee waiting upon me, this is Miss Baldwin. Ladies and gentlemen, you will see that I have nothing concealed up my sleeve, nor do I coerce my friend by telepathy. It will delight her, I am sure, to know that she is walking in upon the scene of me being invited to run for mayor of this city. Like hell it will delight her!"

In the doorway Sierra stood drawing off her pigskin gloves, her invariable leather portfolio tucked under one arm.

"How do you do. I can think of no better choice for mayor," she replied in quiet unsurprised tones, "and of no greater mistake than to accept it. How do you do, Miss Radziwell, Mr. Bowles, Mr. Bates. Glad to know you, Mrs. Mason, Mr. O'Reilly. May I have a cup of that good hot tea to drink a toast to the excellent judgment of Miss Ames, who, I take it, is in the act of declining the honor?"

"You see, my friends! Since this is the first I've heard of this business, it is obviously the first Miss Baldwin has heard of it. No, my refusal, ladies and gentlemen, is final. Spare me the rigmarole of writing it. Of course I'm the timber! I know and Miss Baldwin knows and you know. But you've picked the right lady at the wrong time. Sierra, help your fat friend to show these good people out. I'm getting too rickety for affairs of state anyhow, Lee. I've a goddam crick in my leg. Too much leg, I guess. Thank you all for the compliment. I'll be hanging around your campaign tent, poking my cane under the canvas.

Thank you for the cockeyed compliment. I'll send you all tickets for my new review, 'Girls and Boys.' It will show you what I mean by good timing."

"You are making a mistake in backing your friend up on her refusal, Miss Baldwin," the Honorable Bowles kept reiterating on his way out. "I'm not saying that our party is going to put its candidate in City Hall this time, but the fresh viewpoint of a live-wire woman like Charlotte Ames might accomplish the miracle. She would wake up and clean up this town. She's got guts and gumption. She'd put the skids under the old regime. When you hold out on her, you hold out on good city government."

"I like your feeling that way, Mr. Bowles. But even if I didn't agree with Miss Ames, which I do, I'd follow her intuition. Her sense of timing is magnificent."

"Well, have it your own way, but your Charlottenburg the Magnificent is certainly missing an appointment with destiny this time."

The Charlottenburg emitted a parting guffaw which followed the departing committee down the stairs.

"It won't be the first time! This old maid long ago missed her supreme appointment with destiny. Every old maid does."

There was only firelight in the Charlottenburg's office when Sierra returned to it. It crocheted design over the Charlottenburg who remained beside the uncleared tea table, hands clasped over her cane.

"Heigh ho," she exuded, "and a hey nonny-nonny. Drain water off the Lee Bowles head, and the skull would be empty."

"Just the same, it is a fine tribute!"

"To what? The composite asininity of the Bowles' mind. Why hamstring the female of the species? Let them find another political guinea pig. I don't like serums squirted into me."

"You would like even a losing fight if it were to be a good fight. This one couldn't be, though."

"I wouldn't run for mayor of this town now even if I had a leg on which to run. Which I haven't."

"Is it bad again, Charlottenburg?"

For sudden and quite terrible reply, the Charlottenburg dragged



up her skirt, revealing a short and rotund piano leg, the stocking rolled below the heavily bandaged knee.

"Let me see it."

"Can you take it?"

"Of course, yes!"

The Charlottenburg began unwinding. "Scarcely a leg left to stand on, is there?" she said, as suddenly, shockingly, the bone-deep decay of the wound, which seemed to have a little squirming motion to it, was revealed.

In the silence which followed, Erna, moving softly into the room with a wire basket of letters, paused at what she saw, sickened at what she saw, and crumpled softly to the floor.

"Just a quaint Ames custom," said the Charlottenburg, leaning over to slap her sharply against the cheek. "Her grandfather fainted at the sight of a pricked thumb. Douse some water over her, Sierra. I don't want to move about with these blamed bandages loose. Or can't you take it either?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Sierra, her face a graven image, her step quick as lightning.

Almost immediately, as water trickled beneath the gray lips of Erna, the weak eyes opened, flutteringly.

"Oh," she cried, and started to lift herself to her elbow, "I didn't mean to!"

"Of course you didn't," said the Charlottenburg, covering her exposed upper leg. "Your grandfather didn't either. It was your back luck to stumble in while I was explaining something to Sierra that isn't a goddam bit of your business. It's a good thing you took my basket of correspondence down so neatly with you. Some precious documents, mostly nags from authors and duns from creditors, might have found their way into the fireplace."

"I hate myself for ——"

"Not as much as I hate it in you. Leave it to you to perpetuate the hateful side of the Amesese."

"Your aunt's humor is somewhat heavy-handed, Erna."

"Her—poor leg! I didn't know ——"

"My poor leg, your hind foot. It's a glutton for punishment, that leg. But it's a soldier of fortune. It's down but not yet out. There's life in that thar leg."

"Can't I help, Aunt? I—you see, I hadn't known—I thought it was just rheumatism. Please, can't I help, Aunt?"

"Yes. By taking that damn basket of letters back upstairs and signing them for me, with the exception of the one I've written to the Guaranty Trust in Paris, about Kitty's letter of credit. Something tells me that Kitty's Paris plans are off. Come back after dinner. I want to talk to Sierra now."

"But, Aunt, can't I—help?"

"Yes, by going. Sorry I let you in for a spill. Squeamish as hell of you. Can't blame you, though. It isn't what you might call a beauty spot. Ugh!"

Following Erna's departure, the two women faced the rotted hole in the Charlottenburg's leg. It struck Sierra that it was like a nest of living angry snakes, the lips of the wound flaring back to reveal what seemed a coiling motion.

"How—long—has it—been this way, Charlottenburg?"

"What's the difference. It is this way, isn't it?"

"Why haven't you ——"

"Let out a yell sooner? Isn't it enough to see myself desiccating, to use an elegant twenty-five-dollar word, without dragging you into its stench before it's necessary."

"Charlottenburg, please, please, please!"

"Well anyway, now you understand why I'm not exactly political timber. The old stump's rotting from under me, and about the only way I can tell you the old stump is rotting, is to tell you that it's rotting. So don't expect me to perfume my language. I can't carry this knee across a subway platform, much less a political one. Looks ugly, doesn't it? Good God, don't you go getting squeamish on me. I've known everything there is to know for three months. Only wish the hour wasn't striking when you need to know."

"I can't understand why you—how you—when you came out of the hospital after those three days of observation you seemed to walk a little better. Like Erna, I believed the rheumatic story you told us after the diagnosis. Charlottenburg, how have you been going through your amazing days on this leg! How can you contemplate another production until—until you are better? What does Dr. Alban say?"

"What can he say that I don't already know. It's the stump off me, or me off the stump."

"These cases aren't necessarily like that."

"No, but this one is. Alban doesn't mince facts, thank God. After all, aren't we all rotting away? Don't we all start to desiccate from the day we're born? Well, I'm pretty well along at my rotting. Cancer. The most obvious form of putrefaction, isn't it?"

For answer Sierra dropped to her knee, placing her clear face against the bare deep cushion of the furious knee. "Charlottenburg, dearest!"

"Get up! I trusted you not to do this. I can't stand it if you do. Face it the way I expect you to and the way I know I cannot expect Kitty to face it. I need you not to go to pieces on me. It will take every ounce of strength to help Kits over it. But you—goddam it, I need your strength. Don't you go to pieces on me."

"I haven't the slightest intention of going to pieces because of a sore knee. Only it's taken wind out of my sails to think you've gone on—this way—the pain—alone. We must get it well."

"No baby talk, please. Alban paid me the compliment to pronounce cancer to my face. I'm no fool. The best men there are have had a squint at this knee. It comes off me, or I off it. Either way, I'm ready. I've had a good life, even though it's only been half a life. It would seem ironical though, to have to live it out with half a body. I think I prefer to come off the knee, rather than have the knee come off of me."

"Charlottenburg, you've lived that so-called half-a-life more richly than many who ——"

"I know. I know. We three have lulled ourselves to sleep on that phony philosophy through years of whistling in the dark."

"It's true in your case."

"Tut. If it's to be me off the leg, and of the two I prefer it so, I'm ready. I bellyache a lot about the half-a-loaf of life I've lived. Maybe I'm dead wrong. I'd probably have made a hell of a wife and mother. I've liked what I've had. I've gorged on it, overeaten of the good life. Fattened my body and soul on it. I've told my new Catholic God as much. Didn't know I had one, did you?"

"I know it better than you know I know."

"Well, I have. I'm not in good standing with Him. Don't deserve to be. But I'm going to make my peace with Him. Not because the sign is on my door, and my number seems to be up, but because, dammit, Sierra, somebody's turned up the wick of a lamp on me. I'm seeing the light, and it's a floodlight!"

"Why not, Sharley? Only don't try to undersell yourself to Him as you do to the rest of us. He knows what you are behind that bold, bad, profane front of yours. He knows, better than Kitty or I, about the little people, the tired people, the sick in mind and hope and body, who have reason to bless the ground you walk on. At that, Kitty and I know more than you think we do. Oh, Charlottenburg—don't let go of your hope——"

"What the hell. Life's letting go of me. I'm on velvet. I've lived my half-a-life to its hilt. I've already used up considerable longevity."

"But, Charlottenburg, you're only ——"

"Of course I've lied about my age. But it's a lie so old, I've forgotten it's a lie, except on days of reckoning, such as this one. Fifty-six, my hind foot. Fifty-six years ago I was reaching the pantry shelf."

"Sharley, you're ageless, anyway. One doesn't think of you in years."

"God does. I'm on borrowed time as it is. My mother used to place a lighted lamp in the window when it was time for us children to come indoors, evenings. Well, there's a lamp in the window for me now. With ma, I could steal another game of hop-scotch. There is no time to be stolen when God's lamp appears in the window for you. Neither do I want it. I'm ready to go into that house because I see the light. Sounds lak ole sister sour puss is gittin' religion? Well, mebbe . . ."

"Sharley ——"

"Aside from leaving you and Kits, and certain smells and sights I love in nature, and the goddam sweet nostalgia I've always had for a baby, I've got my grip packed and waiting."

"Cover up—that wound, Sharley."

"Here's a thought that may gag you, but I don't mean it that way. There's something about this godawful sore, sucking my life away from me as if it were a pair of frightful lips, that comforts me in a curious inverted way. By contrast, the immortal

soul of this diseased old carcass of mine can never be cancerous or foul with any mortal ill. The ole immortal soul of the sour puss is going to be white and immaculate and without pain. Every time I look at what is down there on that old peg of mine, I am reminded of what cannot happen to my immortality."

"I ——"

"I hope to God you and Kitty believe in that immortality, Sierra—neither life nor death can lick you then. I hope to God ——"

"You hope to God, what?" asked Kitty, entering, her manner animated as a squirrel's. "Hope to God something nice about me, girls." She stopped short. "Knee bothering you? Try epsom-salt baths. You're going to need a lot of leg work for your 'Boys and Girls.' There's a squib in tonight's *Sun* about it. 'Charlottenburg Predicts a Youth Season in the Theatre.' Ever try massage? Let me."

The Charlottenburg clapped down her skirt.

"I was just showing your ascetic friend, Sierra, my elegant panties."

Unwinding her fur scarf, Kitty dropped to a chair, pushing her hat back on her forehead.

"Panties? Something you use in trousseau, aren't they, or flaunt in the can-can."

"Judging from your sachet-lined dresser drawers," said Sierra, with no show of tremor, "panties are expensive bits of French fluff which you stack together and tie up in pink bows."

"Judging from my dresser drawers," amended the Charlottenburg, "they are bits of bifurcated muslin, not tied together with pink bows. What," asked the Charlottenburg, leveling her eyes and voice suddenly upon Kitty, "is on your mind? Why is the trip to Paris and Jean-Jacques off?"

"Demon woman," cried Kitty, leaning forward to slap the Charlottenburg's knee with a gesture that caused Sierra to grip the sides of her chair, "how did you know everything?"

"Here's my psychic method," replied the Charlottenburg, dipping into a reticule and bringing up a folded cablegram. "It's from Jean-Jacques: *'For God's sake, bring Kitty to her senses. Deal must not fall through. What ails her? Why is she not*

*coming? Use your influence. Reply collect. Frantically yours, Jean-Jacques.'"*

"Poor Jean. I'll make it up to him. He's well rid of me. I can think of nothing that interests me less at this moment than Jean-Jacques-Mullane."

"M—m—m."

"Nothing seems to have interested you more than Jean-Jacques for the last weeks, Kitty. Why all this sudden shift?"

"Be sweet to me, Sierra. I'm going to need it; from *you*, especially."

"Why," asked the Charlottenburg, tapping the cablegram with her forefinger, "have you done this? What mouse is this I smell? Out with it!"

"Kitty doesn't want a big new business. Kitty doesn't want to have to spend so much time in Paris. Kitty's tired, Charlottenburg. Kitty's only human!"

"Brace yourself, Sierra, something is coming when she acts like a blatherass in this fashion. What's up your sleeve?"

"Demon woman! You aren't human! Did you guess, too, Sierra?"

"I haven't the remotest idea what either of you is talking about."

"I had meant to tell you both tonight. But this fiend of a Charlottenburg is psychic. It's something I haven't even quite breathed to myself, because it hasn't yet fully come true. Fiend, you!"

"Sierra," boomed the Charlottenburg, in a mock sort of sing-song, "the day that Leonore walked off with Oliver and left your father seated in an interlude known as the lurch, I could have told you that Jean-Jacques and my own 'Boys and Girls' production were doomed to be let down."

"Witch woman!" cried Kitty. "This is cruelty. The fact that it's true doesn't make it any the less cruel. Don't let her incite you against me, Sierra."

"Nonsense. No future stepmother could hope to know more concerning her future stepchild than Sierra knows about you. Sierra, have you ever envisioned yourself as stepdaughter to Kitty?"

"You devil," screamed Kitty, throwing herself upon the Char-

lottenburg and pummeling her with soft mauve-covered fists, "you devil, devil, devil, I love you!"

"Why, Kitty Mullane," asked Sierra slowly, "have you designs on my dad?"

"He might do worse, mightn't he, Sierra?"

"Kitty, you're serious?"

"Never more so. This demon here slits me open in fun, but she reveals my innards and gizzard and liver in earnest. Sierra, I'm not a designing hussy. If you think I am, lift your little finger and I quit. That's how little of a Du Barry I am."

"Kitty, dare I take you and the Charlottenburg seriously?"

"I should have married your father years ago, Sierra. Instead, I let a nitwit like Leonore think and act faster. And now opportunity has knocked again, and I'm out to salvage what's left of his life, and incidentally mine. If that isn't being honest *ad nauseam*, I don't know what is. Come out of your trance, Sierra!"

"It's a pleasant one, Kits. As late as this afternoon I was making plans to talk over with you and Charlottenburg the need for me to return to the house in Murray Hill—now that Father is in it—alone ——"

"I want marriage and security and position, and all the things Leonore rubbed out because she was having chronic menopause. I know what I'm doing in throwing over Jean-Jacques. I'm taking on life instead. Charlottenburg, don't look at me like that. I love you so much, damn it, that no matter what I do that doesn't include you, hurts."

"Like hell it doesn't include me! If anybody is mad enough to take you on at this stage of the game, he takes on the whole damn shebang."

"I'm serious about being all things to your dad, Sierra. I'm so serious I'm getting religion. I want to go and crawl before that secret little shrine behind your bed, Charlottenburg! Oh, yes, I know it's there all right! I'm prayerful and scared! Scared of you, most of all, I believe, Sierra."

"Scared! I would never have dared dream this could happen. But now that it has, it will mean new lease on life to my father, and to me!"

"Then you don't think I'm a conniving little cootie?"

"I do. One that got under my skin, and I like it there."

"I'm as near being decent in this as I'm ever going to be in anything I undertake, Sierra. Charlottenburg knows what I mean. She sees through me. She always has. I'm good for your father, Sierra. I haven't any illusions about young love and romance. That, somehow, has passed all of us. Well, anyway, passed me. I've long since reached the age of compromise."

"Except with me," snorted the Charlottenburg.

"Haven't we all reached that age, Kit?"

"I suppose so, Sierra. Only it's women like us who are called upon to make the supreme compromise."

"Let your old fat sock sum it up for you. We have to compromise with our anatomies, which want babies; with our sex, which wants bedfellows; with our human nature, which wants home and husband and all the fixin's."

"Right as usual, my Sharley. I want my man and my home and my peace and my security, even though I've got to compromise on the fixin's. The demon woman knows what I want—don't you, Charlottenburg?"

"Does John Baldwin?" inquired the Charlottenburg, dryly.

"Not—yet—all—the way."

"Then see that he does, and quickly," said Sierra, rising and kissing Kitty on her pale hair that scarcely showed its gray.



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## CHAPTER XXX

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THE letter which Erna received from Rolfe was written on lined paper and enclosed in one of those stamped envelopes obtainable at post-office windows.

Dear Erna, The wife and I and the kiddies will be in New York, Tuesday of next week. We are on our way from Tulsa, Oklahoma, where I have been on a project for several years, to a bridge construction job near Brattleboro, Vermont. We will only be in your town between trains, but we would like to come to see you, since I want the wife and children to see you and the lady friends of yours. They have all heard so much about you all. Once when we were living in San Francisco, during the Golden Gate Bridge project there, we went to see the troupe of Europium Dancers, which my wife, who is more given to those things, enjoyed. If you will answer us, to the address enclosed, it will reach us. Looking forward to seeing you and having you meet my family, with best regards, your old friend, Rolfe.

They arrived at teatime about four days later. A bridge table of refreshments was laid out in Erna's small room, which had a day bed and semblance of sitting room to it. At Charlottenburg's

instance, a dish of Viennese candies to which Kitty held agency rights, some of the same firm's famous lebkuchen, baked in the shapes of animals, and fancy sweet sandwiches, also designed for children, made up quite an elaborate refreshment.

It was a diffident meeting between Erna and Rolfe, both flattened by the years, as a nail on a streetcar track is flattened by the passing over it of the iron wheels. Probably unconscious of it himself, Rolfe had married only a slightly varied edition of Erna. Almost identical in coloring with the sagebrush country, where she had spent the greater part of her married life, Mildred might have been sister to Erna. Women like Erna and Mildred were right for men like Rolfe. Bony, tough-fibered, breeders, good toilers, fairly immunized to monotony, they were also immune to the monotone of the Rolfes who fell to their lot. Sisters under skin and in pigmentation, Mildred's gangling youngsters might likewise have been either hers or Erna's.

The implication of a bony-jawed fibrous farm woman, which always hung over Erna, especially in the Fragonard setting of Twenty-one East, came out in italics as she sat at the tea table beside Rolfe and his gawky family.

The children, nondescript, their faces immediately dirtied, wrangled about the sweets, appealing constantly to the parents for arbitration.

"Mama, make Butch stop."

"Aw, Pop, looka Ellie! The yellow cake was mine!"

"Hush!"

"Quit it!"

"Mama, c'n I have another? Ellie took my yellow."

"Drat those kids! Can't you make 'em behave, Rolfe!"

Tired, white-faced and high-voiced, her clothing bearing mussy evidence of nights in day coaches, Mildred, once the door of Erna's room had closed on the alien formality of the remainder of the house, became as much herself as if she were talking over an Oklahoma back fence or paring potatoes on the steps of their onetime boxcar residence on the edge of the Mojave Desert.

"Looks like we ought to call each other by first names from the start, don't it, Erna?"

"Certainly does."

Here one of the frequent interpolations of the children intervened, as Ellie, aged six, scrambled aboard the bony lap of her bony father, thrusting toward his face a sticky tea cake. She was a plain knobby child of knees and elbows, with the faculty of seeming to thrust herself, like a cactus with arms, across the vision of her mother.

"Ellie, get off your papa with those sticky hands! You give everybody the jim-jams."

The child held herself more protectedly against Rolfe, waving the yellow iced cake.

"Want a bite, Daddy?"

He caught the small hand and slid the child off his knee.

"No, go give your mother some."

The undistinguished words shot into the very pit of Erna. They were any man's words, or Rolfe, bald and stooping, as undistinguished in body as in mind, would not be speaking them. Yet, to Erna, they were the luminous words of a man to his woman of a hundred shared intimacies. They were private-sounding words, implying sanctity of hidden experiences between them. They were words that made an outsider of anyone else present. Mysteriously, they belonged to the bedroom, to the secret hours of wedlock, to the privacy of a man and his woman; a woman and her man. That homely row of words somehow lighted the bony Mildred of atrocious posture and bad teeth. It lighted the gawk of a husband who spoke them; it lighted the children, whose pasty faces, begot of fried foods, were dulled by adenoids.

Through Erna, sitting there congratulating herself that she was well out of it, a paradoxical chill of exclusion rattled. No look passed between Mildred and her husband, no texture of tenderness, for that matter, in the words, "No, go give your mother some"; and yet, about the wife of Rolfe, hung the authority of the squaw, whose fecund thighs had been heavy with the processes of creating these undistinguished offspring of her undistinguished self and her equally undistinguished spouse. Across the expressions of both of them, for that matter, was the fed look of assorted satisfactions.

Not that their talk was of much else besides blight after blight of dream after dream. The engineering project in Guatamala

that was to have made their fortune and which had never materialized; the foreclosure of the homestead they had acquired near Pueblo, where another project had failed to materialize; Mildred's three miscarriages and two subsequent operations for complaints that classified as "female"; Rolfe's operation for hernia, and the resultant loss of a Panama Canal assignment. Children's adenoids, malaria, Ellie's one-time threat of infantile paralysis. The marriage of their eldest daughter to an Oklahoma share cropper and now this enforced separation from her.

This small nomadic family of uncertain and meager income, indifferent health, looked all of its liabilities. To top it, Mildred, not reticent in such matters, revealed the need of another impending, if not immediate, surgical operation for intestinal adhesions, the result of four births and as many miscarriages.

Rolfe's new project in Brattleboro, it also developed, was not a certainty. It was the first time the family had ventured to change location on a possibility, but pressure was closing in on Rolfe, who had returned from behind the lines in France with a condition vaguely diagnosed as shell shock.

"Precarious" was scarcely the adequate word for the Mason family. Besides, in conversation it developed that the railroad tickets in Rolfe's pocket, one hundred and twenty-five dollars in cash, a five-year-old Model T Ford car waiting to be sold back in Tulsa, and a two-hundred-dollar insurance policy were all that lay between this family of five and that hope of an engineering assignment in Vermont. Small wonder that the lines cutting into the dry flaky skin of Mildred's face were dark as frowns, or that Rolfe was pale and nervous from unrelenting years of the struggle to make ends meet on an earning capacity that never should have included the wife, much less the brood. Disabilities, in the form of ill-health, unemployment, debt, loomed ahead of this group, if they were to gauge anything of their future from their past, and there was little valid reason to believe that Rolfe, who, in his forties, looked drained, had his best years ahead.

Yet, even so, the solidarity of the family unit seemed to guarantee against the bankruptcy of loneliness. "Doris, stop. Pete, don't let me have to speak to you again. Ellie, quit!" Or partnership talk, which ran along these lines: "The night they rushed me to

the hospital, the doctor told Rolfe peritonitis would have set in if"— "We never had much luck in Oklahoma, but the climate agreed with Ellie, didn't it, Rolfe?"

Mildred might be the victim of bearing-down pains from childbearing; Rolfe might have spelled drab disillusionment to whatever picture Mildred had brought to her marriage; poverty might be upon them, had been from the beginning, and doubtless would continue to squat upon the destiny of a man whose expectancy of success was so obviously low. Yet the bearing of Mildred, whose tired eyes had gazed upon all this defeat, was not that of a woman whom life had chilled to the bone.

Erna could have told you about that kind of chill. It was a sort of cellar-damp, with which she could feel the sides of her inner self sweating.

Tarnished and weary-eyed, Mildred and Rolfe sat beside the tea table, animated in spite of themselves with the mysterious alchemy of their union, the equally lusterless and constantly admonished children, sticky, buzzing, and theirs!

The talk dwindled quickly. A cabinet-sized photograph of their eldest daughter, prettier than anything else pertaining to the Masons, was passed around. Sixteen, and married to the share cropper, she was in the family way, "expecting" any day now.

About to become a grandmother at forty, Mildred's front teeth were already showing advanced decay. Terribly conscious of them, she described their two years' residence in a settlement in the Florida glades, which boasted neither resident doctor, dentist, nor pastor, and where half of the inhabitants were Seminole Indians. From there they had moved to Ohio, where the first spring's flood had carried their small wooden house away, with the family of them riding its roof.

Off the tired and coated tongues of the Masons even adventure sounded routine and commonplace.

The panoramic years of the life Erna had spent in the backwash of Twenty-one East appeared suddenly stale too, and bereft of what had seemed their pulsing significance as she had lived them in the reflected glory of three personalities so perpetually exciting to her.

In no time at all, scarcely before the cakes were consumed, it became apparent that nothing much was left to be said between

Erna and the Masons, except remarks concentrated upon the sticky doings of the children.

"Stop touching those flowers, Peter! You want a noseful of pollen?"

"He's subject to asthma. That's why we have to watch him."

"He sleeps in bed between us, so we can be with him if he gets a choking spell."

Why didn't they make a move to go? Why in heaven's name had she agreed to stop with them down in the Charlottenburg's room? She felt ashamed of this picture of her destiny as it might have been, yet simultaneously she persisted in feeling her own loneliness high-lighted, as it were, by this shabby little unit of a shabby little family.

The picture conjured of Mildred and Rolfe in bed, their asthmatic offspring wheezing between them, was not one calculated to edify, but something lonely as wolves was crying within Erna. Finally she rose.

"We had better go down now. The Charlottenburg will be expecting us."

The Charlottenburg, who had just been left alone by a departing client, was in the act of popping two white tablets into her mouth from a bottle of them which she hastily slipped back into a desk drawer.

"Well, I'll be goddamned—excuse me, children—it's Rolfe! So this is your family. Howdy, children. Howdy, Mrs. Rolfe. What's your first name?"

"Mildred."

"Milly. By God, regular back-bone-of-the-nation family. Didn't think you had it in you, Rolfe. Hello, girls. Come here, boy. Good, I like your handshake. Fatten him up, Milly. Old-fashioned cod-liver oil will do it. That's what they used on me, and see the results! Girl, come here! Adenoids, eh? I'll get them out for you! Dr. Akroid, world specialist, has a daughter in my 'Boys and Girls' revue. Won't cost you a penny. Uh, uh, don't touch Europium, little girl. She'll scratch hell out of you. She's a one-man cat, and I'm her man!"

Gawks, all, the family stood transfixed before the figure squatting on her chair, and then before Kitty, who, mauve-pawed, entered the room with all the petite folderols of manner she put

on alike before grocer boys or before guests, across counters or across her own table. Likewise they stood transfixed at Sierra, later described by Mildred as "that Saint Cecelia in a mannish shirtwaist and skirt."

Excitement across his tallow face, Rolfe herded his little clan into the nimbus of these three, the children hanging back, Mildred holding grimly to them, or they to her by their bony young arms.

"Here they are, Aunt," said Erna, standing none too graciously aloof.

Light sweat sprang out on Rolfe's narrow brow as he stood before the Charlottenburg, cupping his wife's sharp elbow in his nervous palm.

"The wife and kiddies want to see the ladies I've talked so much about."

"Good enough. Sit down one and all. You're as much of a show to us as we are to you. Outside of stage brats in curls and diction, and a fourteen-year-old horror of a Harvard prodigy who can recite Euclid to Brahms, these old walls haven't ever rung to childish merriment. This is a household, Milly, without a baby shoe hidden in a drawer, or a pottie or a high chair tucked away in the attic. True, I'm about to do a kid show called 'Boys and Girls.' All these young ones of yours seem to lack for parts in it, Rolfe, is what it takes."

"Didn't I tell you she was a card?" cried delighted Rolfe to his wife.

"Yes, just the old town's blatherass. Erna, go in my room, and on the second shelf in the right-hand closet is a sack of jelly beans. I like to nibble 'em before I go to bed. Bring them in for the youngsters. Sorry I haven't any walnuts about. I'd show you how to crush them in the palm of the hand and get the meat out whole."

The boy Peter raised his whitish eyes to the square figure on the chair, with her feet a few inches off the floor, and her fingers protruding like sausages from the tiny cushion of hands that had no wrists.

"Could you squash—the whole—world?" he queried.

"Yes, and get the meat out," said Kitty dryly from the sideline.

"Instead of muttering into your beard, Miss Mullane, you might concern yourself with sweetmeats for these children."

"Does sweetmeat grow on cows?" asked Mildred's youngest.

"Good God, are you the kind of brats who ask questions that make monkeys out of grownups? Take 'em away!"

"She's the darndest kid for asking questions," cried Mildred, in her voice that was not unlike the whine of a peanut whistle. "Once when we were living outside Tulsa, don't she up and ask the circuit rider who had a beard, if faces like his is where mattress-filling grows."

Encouraged by the focused spotlight, the daughter of Mildred and Rolfe fastened her whitish eyes upon the Charlottenburg.

"Have you got a little girl?"

Mildred jerked the child by her bony arm.

"Doris, stop being rude."

"The child isn't being rude," said Sierra, smoothing her hair. "It's a natural question."

"Not here."

"Why?"

"My wife means—why she means——"

"I mean——"

"She means—women like you—smart women like you, aren't for just having kids and fussing around and making a home for some man——"

"Yes, that's what I meant. Imagine any of you doing housework or—or diapers—I mean— Oh, I didn't mean to say that!"

Into the appalled silence which flashed over Mildred and Rolfe the Charlottenburg roared with instant and immense gusto.

"You've said it, my girl! What this house lacks is diapers. Wash lines and wash lines of diapers."



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## CHAPTER XXXI

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A SMALL coal fire burned in an old-fashioned grate set into one of those white marble mausoleum mantelpieces in the small third-floor room John Baldwin had always used as a retreat into privacy.

Except for the spot of fire, it might have been a foreman's office in a mining camp. Bare of any furnishings except two pine-wood chairs and a pine table (his first furniture, relics from his first office in a Butte, Montana, mining shack), it actually and mysteriously seemed to smell of saddle leather, old pipes and hot dust. A bullet, imbedded in the back of one of the chairs, had a red circle painted around it. Fired in a street brawl outside that Montana window, it had whizzed past his head one evening, nicking his ear as he had sat at this pine-wood table poring over the day's pan of ore. The old pan itself stood on that table now, among a litter of newspapers, pipes, maps and current documents. A sawed-off shotgun, rusted, hung above the door, and on the window sill a stuffed prairie dog looked wistfully to the westward. Leonore had not touched this room. Years of closed-in pipe smoke tasted on the lips as you entered it and reeked in the cold bowls of the collection of tinted meerschaums in an old shoe box beneath the table.

Baldwin fitted this room like a round peg in a round hole.

He stretched his legs in it. He rubbed his jowls in it, as if he had four days' stubble there instead of a clean shave. He sucked his cold pipe in it and let his suspenders hang. He was himself here, after the manner of a man who, having no affiliation with the present, sits among the nostalgic relics that carry him backward by way of their sight and smell.

It was the most alive room in the house. It smelled of man, old leather, horse, and hot sun on prairie dirt. Even the stuffed little prairie dog on the sill seemed not to be looking across the street into the windows of a dentist, but across sagebrush.

It was an old shoe of a room, that contained Kitty as incongruously as such a room must. In fact, when she burst in upon him, brushing past a maid who had come up to announce her, Baldwin rose from his chair hurriedly, as if to save her the impact of entering it.

"Bless my soul—Mary shouldn't have let you up here in this place!"

"She didn't, John. She tried in her very best front-door manner to prevent it. In fact, Mary positively forbade me to crack in upon you in this manner, and so here I am."

"Feeling, I hope, as young as you look."

There were small birds on Kitty's trifle of a hat. A small round muff and scarf of gray squirrel, that corresponded to the Maltese quality of her eyes, set her off quite dazzlingly, considering that her hair, of the same tousled cut that had followed her typhoid fever years before, no longer took the dyes well. It was tinted now, the rather startling mauve tones which conceded the grays in it. In fact, Mullane-blue hair was just beginning to rock the dowager world.

"People no longer compliment me, John, on what I am. Nowadays they compliment me for looking like what I am not."

That was too obtuse for him. You could tell that, when he raised the eyes in his gray face. They were stricken-looking, as if they had been awake through long periods of staring into darkness.

"Sierra just left me. Has she sent you to help me keep the vigil?"

"Nonsense. Naturally Sierra doesn't like you alone and brood-

ing, but she doesn't even know I'm here. I thought perhaps you might pay me the high compliment of being glad to see me."

"This is the decree," he said, fingering a document. "Would you like to see it?"

"No. I never look into the casket at funerals, or peruse divorce decrees. Surely you aren't sitting here poring over yours?"

He regarded her with his bleak eyes and flipped the folded document away from him with his thumb and third finger.

"They read ugly," he said. "It's a kind of funeral on paper. Never read one until I read my own. Nasty. A piece of life has died, and you receive its death notice."

She reached over, took up the decree, and shoved it beneath a mass of newspapers.

"There's your dead past, buried." Drawing up her chair closer to the table, she placed her gloved hand over his liver-splotched one. "I'm sorry you're brooding over what's dead and buried, John. I had hoped you would feel well rid of it."

"I do. Since it had to be this way, I'm glad it's over and done with. I wish them well. No grudge. I wouldn't have them any other way than happy. They will be, over in Europe, with what they have to live on."

"You must put them out of your mind now, as if they had never been."

"Yes, what is done is done. No brooding. I valued what I had when I had it. Lost it. I'm a taker-of-life-as-it-comes." The words had no vitality. They seemed to crumble as he spoke them. "It's the damned decree coming today—does something to the very gizzard of a man, Kitty."

"My dear friend."

"You three gals have missed a lot, but you've kept yourselves clear of the kind of messing up men and women can do to each other's lives. 'Tain't a natural way of living, according to my way of thinking. Two halves of a Seidlitz powder don't matter unless they come together. Always have felt my gal, Florence, who ain't worth Sierra's little finger, has got the best of it. But your kind is spared a lot, even if you miss a lot."

"There are things, John, a woman doesn't want to be spared."

He sighed and turned his face toward the window, out of which the prairie dog stared into the west.

"I never owned her," he said, irrelevantly, "so I guess a man can't be said to lose what he never had. The half-a-loaf she gave me should have been gall from the start. In a way it was, but I kept hoping." He struck the table a loud bang, as if his thoughts hurt him. "It's better this way. Her infatuation for that squirt was a sickness in her blood. A man doesn't blow out a squirt's brains because a sick woman can't get him out of her head. The only way was to let it go on happening ——"

"My poor, poor John," she said, and patted his hand until all of a sudden he jumped back from it, as if her cigarette end had touched him.

"I liked her! I liked her so much that I stooped to making myself satisfied with what was left. And so we went on cheating one another. I could have gone on stooping to take what was left, but the sickness in her blood for the squirt got too much for her. I hope to God she carries out a suicide pact with him before she wakes up some morning and finds herself lying beside a tailor's dummy."

"Don't worry about Leonore's destiny, John. She's going to be able to take care of it as she always has in the past. Taking care of Leonore first is one of her accomplishments."

"She was a sweet woman."

"You're the one to be concerned about in this situation, John, because you matter most."

"A man at the end of a road doesn't matter. Since it happened, the days just pass, and me with them. Getting toward the end, I guess."

She had her hand on his again, pressing it down against the table.

"Don't say that, John. Life is too good to be thrown aside as if it were an old rag—you're too good."

"Mine is—an old rag. I've had my day. It's been a good day. But love for life is running out of me like sand. I've had my share, though. More ups than downs. Mamie in her beginnings. What a woman! Children that have turned out well. A daughter in Sierra that doesn't happen to many men. Tragedies have crushed me down, but I won't leave life feeling cheated. And, except for Sierra, I won't leave it feeling regretful."

"Don't say that, John."

"When all is said and done, allowing for making three fortunes, losing two, and fearing God as much as the run of them, my country and Sierra are as much as I've got to show for my life's work. And that's a very great deal. America gave me life and I would give mine back for her. There's millions like Florence, but women like Sierra don't happen along every day, any more than saints do. Her mother, thank God, lived long enough to know that."

"You're right, John."

"The whores, and the girls she has saved from being whores, know that about her."

"Not even you, her father, know what I know about her, John. There are hundreds who would rise up and call her blessed, if they only knew her name or address. She works like that."

"Don't fool yourself. I know. She thinks she's done with her inheritance, the way her sister Florence is. But there's another million I have cached away for her, where hell's fires can't get at it before I die."

"That's grand of you, John. She'll spend it the way one of the saints would have spent it, if you could imagine a saint having a cool million to spend."

"I wish she wasn't quite so lonesome-seeming. Even with friends like you—it sticks out all over her."

"You don't mean lonesome, John. If anything, there are too many people around Sierra. You mean lonely. That starts in the heart, and has not to do with lonesomeness."

"Call it what you will, Sierra's that."

"When it comes to that, John, you can't tell any of us in Twenty-one East anything about that state of being known as loneliness. We traffic in it. Our kind of women breed loneliness. We discovered loneliness, or perhaps it discovered us."

"I never could make out your kind of gals. And then I went and got one for a daughter."

"Psychiatrists have a name for gals of our age, without husbands and children and all the varieties of fulfilments that go with them. Whatever it is, there's enough loneliness goes to bed every night in the house at Twenty-one East, which you helped us buy, to blow the roof off."

"I dunno. It's all too much for me. Sierra don't talk such

things. She had no mother to bother about such things in the years when she was growing up. Her sister, not worth her little finger, seemed to get the beaux. I never had mind for such matters where my girls were concerned. Their own affair, I figured, if I figured at all. Just so they behaved, I figured. Dammit, I couldn't foresee ——"

"The Charlottenburg has a smart thing to say about Sierra. She declares that she sort of distills a serum out of her own loneliness, and uses it to cure others. Most of us are just lonely for the things you can touch and feel and kiss and love and enjoy."

"Guess I'm too simple-minded to follow all this. You're lonesome or you ain't, according to circumstances, and that's that."

"Well, I'm one of those who is lonesome, but for the things you can get at. Has it ever occurred to you, John, that a man like you and a woman like me, both a bit dusty from the long road, might find themselves a bit lonesome for one another, without quite realizing it."

"Can't say it has, Kitty, but it's something to think about."

"You see, John, I've figured it out. You're the newly divorced husband of a woman who didn't sufficiently value the qualities I respect and value."

"I ——"

"On top of all this, you happen to be the father of a woman who means more to me than almost anything in the world, except the things no two normal women can mean to one another. John, there's still time! Let me make the remainder of life over for you. For us both. I'm a good maker-over. I'm not a Sierra, who apparently was sent to brood over the woes of the world and do something about them. I'm just a smart girl from Kerry Patch. I'll do with your life what I can do with a room. Brighten it. Cretonne it. Flood it with light. Let me refurnish and refurbish your spirit. I'm ambitious, John. You know that. I know that. But your happiness will come first, and if my ambitions become a nuisance, the ambitions will have to go. But they won't. I'm smart like that, John. And one of my ambitions will be never to clutter up your life with what you don't want. I want to be all things, John, to you—to the father of my Sierra. It's what gave me the courage and the—impudence—to come here tonight and

take this chance of being thrown out of the house of the father of the woman I love best in the world. John!"

"God almighty alive! I believe you're proposing marriage to me, Kitty—at my age ——"

"I am, John—at our age!"

"Good God almighty, why didn't I think of it first. Come here! Take off those purple mitts and put your hand back on mine. That must have been a thrill I felt a moment ago, right through those mitts. Didn't have the sense to know it, or didn't dare to know it. *Come here!*"

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## CHAPTER XXXII

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THE Charlottenburg's production of "The Boys and Girls Shoestring Review," presented in conjunction with a brand-new firm of producers, Milton and Shuster, two young men with more backbone than backing, derived its name from the fact that it had figuratively been produced on a shoestring.

New faces, fresh young voices, unknown names, scenery designed and executed by students in a school of theatrical design, had accomplished a new low in Broadway production costs.

"The Boys and Girls Shoestring Review" raised a first-night curtain with the Charlottenburg slogan "I would rather provide your entertainment than your civic virtues" written across it in rhinestones.

Chatty and acid as a gossip sheet, current as an editorial, Shoestring Review, by way of three sheets and paid newspaper space, proclaimed itself as "Beautiful but not Dumb."

In the center of twenty inches of exorbitant white newspaper space the Charlottenburg announced in five metropolitan newspapers, the Sunday preceding the opening, that she had the honor to present "A review so stunningly conceived that even its failure would be flawless."

An urban and urbane audience, as carefully and purposefully untypical of Broadway first nights as the new faces on the stage



were untypical of old favorites, crowded into the pint-sized theater.

Intimate as two in a hansom cab, "The Boys and Girls Shoestring Review," recruited chiefly from summer stock companies, little-theater groups, dramatic schools, mingled with the audience, danced through it, and even with it, rushing down from the footlights to pick their partners from the orchestra seats for a schottische in the aisles; dragged miniature pianos with them; coaxed spectators from their seats up to the stage for tea-and-stronger; crashed down with lively insouciance the classic barriers of curtain and footlights, and resolved the evening into an intimate novelty that ended in a free-for-all audience-and-cast quiz: How Well Informed Are You? Which last, by the way, was also followed next day by a half-page advertisement in five newspapers announcing that Bluberry Brothers Sporting Goods Company held the "exclusive New York rights to the Kitty Mullane new drawing-room game, 'How Well Informed Are You?' (patent pending), which was played with such riotous effect in the town's new hit, 'The Boys and Girls Shoestring Review.' Another Kitty Mullane novelty, sure to set the town agog."

From the first moment of the entrance of the fifty new faces onto a stage set divided into two dressing rooms, where twenty-five girls and twenty-five boys changed from their street clothes into rehearsal rompers, the casual trifle of an evening began to spell success. From every carefully rehearsed ad lib, to every impeccably planned bit of spontaneous familiarity with the audience, to every well thought out bit of extemporaneous stage business, the Charlottenburg's hand-picked boys and girls moved to the mysterious and intangible rhythm of audience approval.

Without a break in the hilarious stride of the evening, "The Boys and Girls Shoestring Review" marched to what would have been its final curtain, had it boasted one, but which consisted, instead, of the fifty boys and girls rushing from the stage out into the auditorium to assist the audience into its wraps, singing their theme hit: "That's All. There Isn't Any More."

Something almost troglodytic about her, the Charlottenburg, up there in the cave of her draped loge, struck her cane against the floor against audience exodus, and without rising cast her pale amused eyes over the standing and applauding mass of audience,

which by now had learned to expect, in fact demand, a first-night curtain speech.

"Well, Customers," she said, lackadaisically raising her pudge of a hand for silence, "you like my brats, don't you? (Applause.) You like them because through your veneered outer shells you sense what is adventurous and young. (Laughter.) Hell, if you would let Charlottenburg run your entertainment lives for you, you wouldn't have white corpuscles from anemia of the aesthetics. (Laughter.) You like these kids for the same reason that you like springtime and the smell of coffee and young Olympian runners with torches. This show doesn't deal in white meat or smut. It's quick and clean, like the young Olympic runner with the torch. I and my associates are proud to have given you this show. These kids you saw tonight are as American as ham and eggs. I'm proud of them. Spread the news around town that my nice clean American brats are something to see! If the critics don't agree, I'll meet those who are still here in the back lot later."

A wag in the gallery called down, "Charlottenburg for Mayor!"

"Not on your life. I'd rather provide your laughter than your civic virtues."

"Try both."

"Good night, everybody. Turn up your collars, it's snowing. Thank God this show turned up the corners of your mouths. Good night. I love you all. If the critics don't rave tomorrow, it's because they have hardening of the heart arteries. Run along, everybody. Run along."

The exodus was slow, reluctant, good-humored. During it, the Charlottenburg turned back to the occupants of her box, Kitty, John, Sierra and Erna.

To those few permitted to behold it, the getting about of Miss Ames had by now become a procedure laborious and almost shocking.

It meant practically a hauling together of every resource at the command of the vast hulk of woman whose body rose from a chair as the folds of a tent rise from the ground when the pole begins to hoist. The face did not reveal the tremendous self-leverage required to get the Charlottenburg into motion, but the heaving of the body did. People who came in casual contact

with her did not realize it, for few, if any, had so much as seen her walk down a hallway or along a pavement in many a day. By a cunning and consistent system of self-management, she was invariably in position first. In her desk chair. In her theater seat. In her place at table. That day was past when she preceded her guests, as slowly ambulant as a caravan, into the dining room or down a flight of stairs. Almost imperceptibly past, however.

Few realized to what extent the Charlottenburg was now chair-ridden; Kitty, strangely, least of all. Kitty, who was so perfectly attuned to the Charlottenburg that she took pride in being able to anticipate her spoken wishes, realized with a start, as she followed the Charlottenburg, who led the way this time, through the box to a side exit of the theater, that it was months since she had seen her walk. And what a walk! A ship plowing through a beach. A rocking, buckling ship.

There were hot and cold drinks, sandwiches and salads, at Twenty-one East, which Erna produced from a thermos table known as "The Butler" (patent pending), and about to be elaborately launched by Kitty and the Charlottenburg, in conjunction with its Chilean inventor. On a capital investment of twelve thousand dollars, shared evenly by Kitty, the Charlottenburg, Elsie Pretorious and John Baldwin, "The Butler Company" was in the current process of incorporation.

Around this magi of a table before the Charlottenburg's fireplace, its sliding top revealing compartments of perfectly chilled or heated foods and drinks, the erstwhile occupants of the box at "The Boys and Girls Shoestring Review" drew up for it their congress of opinion. Except Kitty. Her fragility enhanced by her pastel gown, gloves crushy about her wrists, the smallness of her head further emphasized by its shock of short tight curls, she wound herself on the footstool usually occupied by the tortoiseshell cat, one hand resting lightly on John's knee.

"You've the town by the tail again, Sharley," she yawned. "If only your Kitty weren't so sit-by-the-fire, she'd swing the town by the tail with you, the way we did with Club Gala. Blame your big bad papa, Sierra. He's given me the sit-by-the-fires. Don't look so bored, Sharley. Love's grand."

Without reticence, John Baldwin's big hand, which still bore the calloused look of one shaped to the drive and dig of the

shovel, dropped to Kitty's ash-colored curls, shampooing softly into them.

"Mebbe," replied the Charlottenburg, "but it is making a pair of powerful nitwits of you and John, both of you old enough to know better."

Leaning forward, Sierra placed her hand over the hand of her father, as it rested on Kitty's curled pate.

"You can't tell a hard-boiled egg by its shell, Father. Charlottenburg is soft in the middle."

"But not in the brain," snapped Miss Ames, helping herself to a steaming concoction of Crab Newburgh long since forbidden by her doctors.

"Your comic spirit, my Charlottenburg, has the rattle of a skeleton. John dear, if we don't hurry up and commit our matrimony, your Kitty is going to lose her nerve. My big bold miner, couldn't you manage to marry the three of us? Dear, dear no, that would be incest or bigamy or trigamy or something, wouldn't it? Well then, marry just Sharley and me. High Sierra is going to take my marriage better than Sharley. Sierra's greatest need is to be needed. But I declare I think Sharley needs me. Johnnie, my miner, marry us both! Two wives can be better than one, only if the second is the Charlottenburg."

His face alive with laugh wrinkles long in disuse, Baldwin rumbled with amusement.

"Don't know but what that's a good idea. Nobody on earth knows you, or how to manage you, as well as the Charlottenburg."

"In classic idiom, John, I'm on to your fiancée. I can read through her as if she were an egg being candled. No thank you, John. Take your punishment alone. Sierra and I will throw out all the damned spindly-legged chairs in the house, slice our bread at table, and go back to napkin rings and fried foods."

"Don't make me cry, Sharley. John, let's all of us cry. Your Kits is so happy and so mizzable. I can't bear it if the Charlottenburg and Sierra are mizzable over losing me and I can't bear it if they aren't. Oh, Johnnie, Kitty's so mizzable."

He could not keep his tender fingers off her, or his tender face, his tender eyes, his tender manner, from enfolding her.

"Good God, this is not a sentimental binge, my lovesick pussies. This is once more a brief gathering of the clan to cast an eye

backward over the evening's goings on. Let's decide in a few well chosen words whether my 'Shoestring' looks good, or belongs to the tripe family. If you think I am going to sit up and wait for the morning papers in order to see how a few critics, suffering from mental duodenal ulcers, are going to digest tonight's wholesome entertainment, you've another think coming. If they pan the pants off the show, it can at least be said that the show wore pants, which is more than can be said for most of the white-meat opuses that are being dished up to the customers this season."

"Must you, Charlottenburg?" asked Sierra, fastening still-water eyes upon her friend, her tone the same in which she had made that remonstrance over the repetitive years.

"Must I what?" snapped the Charlottenburg, in the tones she had answered that remonstrance over the repetitive years. "John, you're a normal kind of fellow, in spite of your complete stupefaction before the obvious wiles of one Kitty Mullane! But how on earth did you beget this snow maiden who calls herself your daughter? Some crib-swapping must have taken place, or I'll eat my shimmy."

With the kind of mystification that almost invariably flowed into his gaze when he contemplated her, Baldwin laid eyes on his daughter.

"You should know by now, Charlottenburg, that she's like the high mountains she's named after."

"Father, are you trying to sell me to the Charlottenburg?"

"Not for all the money there is. Your new stepmother and I are going to keep our shares in you."

"Great cream-colored Christopher, let's get down to shoestring facts. You're the man in the street, John. The guy who takes the beatings. The great American public, that may not know what it wants but certainly knows what it doesn't want. Mount the rostrum, then, and tell us how you liked your three-dollars-and-thirty-cents' worth of escape tonight."

"It's a good show. I liked it."

"Why?"

"Well, don't know as I know."

"That's as good a reason as the barnacles of opinions the critics let accumulate under their water-logged brains."

"Have a care, Sharley, the reviews tomorrow may be on the good side."

"In which blessed event I shall proceed to celebrate the perspicacity of the critic. But let's get ahead so I can rip the panties off the youngsters at tomorrow's rehearsal. What did you think of the 'Girls Who Aren't Glad' number, John?"

"The one where they held the false faces? Well, now that you ask me, there was something a little puzzling to me about that. Why were they carrying two faces?"

"I told Milton that the entire skit was too 'precious' and I'll run from preciousness with the same speed that Kitty falls for it."

"But *yozi're* precious, darling."

"Well, if I am, it's horse-sense preciousness. What about the 'Mother, I'm a Man,' number? If there's any way on earth to make a male chorus look male, I have yet to find it. No use trying to cheat an audience with phony human nature. They shy from it as a horse does from fire."

"That's the difference between you and me, Sharley. I like those two numbers because I'm phony; and thank God, Johnnie doesn't care, do you, Johnnie, that your Kitty is phony?"

"Listen, I've stood about as much of this double talk as my stomach will endure. I call this meeting to a close, owing to seasickness induced by Miss Mullane."

Nevertheless, it was past two o'clock before discussion subsided and Kitty would tolerate the idea of Baldwin's departure, following him into the lower hall and whispering there, Charlottenburg declared, "Like a house-maid with her cop."

Long after the household had disappeared behind various closed doors, Kitty, still wakeful following Baldwin's reluctant and long-drawn departure, tip-toed into the Charlottenburg's bare bed-chamber, carrying a small lingerie pillow, edged in babyfied lace, which she insisted would be palliative for the bone-tiredness which must be pulling at the Charlottenburg's knee muscles.

"Good God, get that thing out of here. Give it to a harpy."

"We're all that at heart. Your harpy-at-heart neck might as

well sink into the soothing sweetness this pillow has to offer, as any other harpy neck. Where's Erna?"

"I sent her to bed because I'm fed up with having people shoot my privacy to pieces. You get that, Miss Mullane? Goddam bored with lack of privacy!"

"How wonderful it is going to be to have done with privacy, Sharley. I never want mine again. I'm going to be the sort of wife who'll comb her hair in her shimmy before her hubby and adore being called 'the little wife.' I don't want any more privacy ever. Only the most unfastidious lack of it."

The Charlottenburg sank down on the edge of the bed, her dress hanging open.

"You're tired, Sharley!"

"I wish to God you would stop slapping labels on me. I'm not tired. I'm never tired."

"Sorry. But here is the pillow for the back of your harpy neck which isn't tired. If you can't bear the sight of me, at least let Erna or Sierra, when she comes in to say good night to you, rub salve, or whatever it is you rub, on your sore leg, which isn't sore and which isn't hurting, and get some sleep which you don't need, and kiss your Kitty, whom you don't love, good night."

"You little fool," said the Charlottenburg, catching Kitty's small face suddenly in the vise of her thumb and forefinger, "I wish to God I didn't."

"Sharley, if you mind too much, I won't! You once said, and I've never forgotten it, that I remind you of someone who has been eating chicken and loved it. Greasy and greedy, back to my ears. I feel so greedy, leaving you—wanting you—wanting—wanting ——"

"Right. Greedy back to your ears for life, and goddam it, I want you to have it! It's coming to you! Old John Baldwin may be my idea of a spavined horse, but if he's what you want, I say again, goddam it, I want it too. So stop your nonsense."

"You don't really, Sharley. You've an idiotic fear that it's going to change things ——"

"John Baldwin can't change the picture of two old females who missed the boat. At least there used to be three, and now there will only be two."

"You like John, Sharley, you know you do, and you like me

—you like me so terribly you're being mean as hell to me to prove it."

"I want you to have every goddam thing you want. I only wish it was me you wanted, me and me alone. I'm greedy over sharing you, mean and greedy, and I wouldn't have you do anything but what you're doing, for more money than John Baldwin ever laid eyes on."

"I'm going to make John happy, Sharley! Not in Leonore's messy cheating way. But ——"

"You're going to make him happy pretty much the way you've made me happy over more years than I've had a right to it. By your goddam natural sweetness that not even your second-classness can obscure. I love you, Kits. You're a bitchy little phony, but way down deep in you something shines, by God. Diamond-bright within you, something shines. A rhinestone, probably."

"Nobody, you bad ole critic-of-my-soul you, or—my John least of all, thank God—knows me as you know me, Charlottenburg. In a strange way, you're as close to me as I am to myself."

"It's a foul nuisance to know a person as well as I know you, Kits."

"The things people have been saying, for years, about us three, Sharley, the slimy things human beings can say about one another, have slithered off our backs like water. But maybe there is something a little bit abnormal about the oneness of you and me. I sometimes feel as if I fit right into your personality, like Russian boxes fit one into the other. We are sort of two in one, Sharley."

"I like it that way, dammit."

"I could swear I adore Sierra as much as I do you, Sharley. But I'd be ten times the bed tick that I am if some of the clean high winds off her mind, blown my way, had not cleaned up my second-class soul a bit. But a bed tick doesn't look at a mountain."

"Heaven help you if a bed tick gets into your hair, though, the way you've got yourself into mine."

"Sharley, is anything more than my getting myself married the matter with you these days? It can't be just that, when you know you're going to have as much and more of me than ever. There's a look to you, Sharley! What are you and Father Macklin cooking up between you? I'm not the only one in this household noted for unpredictable lunacy. You're not going in for Catholicism,



are you, Sharley? Or is it this marriage of mine? If you don't want it—I may be greasy with greed for life clear back to my ears, but if you don't want it, Sharley—say so! Say so! Charlottenburg—are you crying?"

"The hell I am. And if I am, it's because I'll never get you dry behind those seemingly sophisticated ears of yours. You little fool. What happiness can I possibly have to look toward except your achievement of yours!"

"What a darling thing to say!"

"Don't snivel over me. I'm well able to take care of myself. You've got what you want."

"Oh, Sharley, I have—and I'm so tired ——"

"Exactly. Clinging vine finds trellis. John may wake up some morning to discover himself choked by your dear little, steel little tendrils, but just the same, he's going to have the damned idiotic joy of possessing a woman who doesn't make sense, but who is going to make him so goddam happy that he'll live to bless the day Leonore walked out on him. And now, get out. You're boring the daylights out of me."

The silence left by Kitty's departure had a sort of drone to it, that late insect tune of small hours. Seated on the side of the bed where Kitty had left her, the Charlottenburg dozed intermittently into it, her jerking knee beginning, as always, to intensify its pain as the night wore along.

Presently came Sierra's usual three knocks against the door, her invariable ritual before turning out her own lights.

"You in bed, Charlottenburg?"

"Yes."

"All right?"

"Yes."

"Want anything?"

"No ——"

"Sure?"

"Sure, Mike."

"Good night."

"It's past three. Get yourself some sleep. Good night."

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Yes?"

"Sure you're all right?"

"Right as rain."

"Good night."

Once more the silence began to sing. As if reluctant to disturb the quiescence of her pain, the Charlottenburg continued to perch there on the side of the bed, resuming her doze with fits and starts.

Presently, however, she keyed herself to step to the floor, a procedure which Erna, when present, could skillfully aid, and made her way into the bathroom to fill the tub with steaming hot water.

The great sheaf of her black lace and satin evening uniform removed, she appeared as grotesque, in her short chemise, as a Fiji Island wood carving.

Steam, enclosing her in vapor, arose to cloud the mirrors and nickle-plated appurtenances. It was her habit, against orders from doctors, thus to immerse her knee in the nightly tub which she found soothing, sliding neck-high into water, as hot as she could endure.

The temporary surcease was scarcely worth the barrage of pain almost sure to follow this immersion. But night after night she was now permitting herself to succumb to the brief period of respite. The heated water hugged up, warm and protective, about her body, thawing, resting and reviving her mind, swathing her pain.

Twice as long as usual, tonight, eyes closed, her jade-white body magnified and fantastic as some deep-sea specimen, she lay in the filled tub, the steamed air sweating.

It pleased her as she relaxed, momentarily free from pain, to imagine herself sinking into arms engulfing and protective. Alternately, the arms were those of a brawny Orpheus, or of a gargantuan Achilles of a fellow, invariably larger than herself, a mountain of a figure which sometimes dimmed and became hills or forests of trees with winding, embracing gestures.

Under water her vast breasts floated upward, tugging away from the high platform of her torso; her short heavy legs, strange submarine flora anchored to the vast mushroom of abdomen. The sweating bathroom grew dimmer, the figure submerged beneath the water, quiet, except for the little floating movements of the breasts.

Relaxed for the first time in a long and relentless day, the closed eyelids, as if responding to an impetus from their underside, took on a tilt, indefinable quiet seeming to spread around them; and as the lips moved slightly, this quiet encompassed the entire face, leaving her embalmed in soothing waters, disembodied from pain.

When Kitty's gift of a beautifully chimed little Empire clock gonged softly four times, the closed face, lying back against the slant of tub, did a strange thing. It began to cry. Not with sound or even distortion, but by way of tears that came whole, from the down lids, and ran off the face sideways into the water.

Tears off the emptiness of a closed face. Tears from a well, down deep beneath the surface of the days. As if shocked at the escape of them, the Charlottenburg shook herself. Beneath the heavy magnification of water, the elephantine torso rolled slightly and began to heave itself for the vast procedure of emergence.

Almost before she had manipulated herself out of the tub, the fiery furnace of her left leg sprang to life again, pain twisting her postures.

Wrapped in an immense bathrobe, hands clasped muff-fashion inside its large sleeves, her face, even in the act of biting back its agony, was that of a pink and plump babe, steamy from its bath.

It had become her night-after-night custom by now to rumple her bed into semblance of having been used, and sit instead on a straight-backed chair beside it, her leg propped.

She could sleep in that position, when the pain receded, or when, reluctantly, she resorted to her bottle of prescribed tablets. She could even knit off the tilt of this propped-up posture, or slant a writing pad against her thigh and smoke chains of black cigars.

When the night wore along too relentlessly, and the attempts at preoccupation went down before the fury of pain, she fished about in her knitting bag for the palliatives, which she invariably took in smaller dosage and with less frequency than the label dictated.

It was only after those exhausting biweekly occasions when she underwent the therapy of her "radium treatments" that she

permitted herself the prescribed amount in full, a restraint censured rather than encouraged both by doctors and Sierra.

"Dammit to hell, you have to take it as it comes, even when it comes fast and furiously."

"But, Charlottenburg," Sierra had remonstrated over and over again, "it costs strength to fight pain."

"No doctor living knows as much about me, as me. Wait until I find God—if this damned sore knee will let me wait that long——"

"Charlottenburg, it's hard to know how to take you when you talk that way."

"That's the point. Once I find Him, He can take me— God, how gratefully I'll go!"

"Charlottenburg!"

"Don't be a fool, Sierra, and take me at my word. It's counter-feit."

Meanwhile, through the inexorable depths of her inexorably long night, the pain gnawed along.

Yes, sir—dammit to hell, resumed the Charlottenburg stream of thought, you have to take it when it comes. Even when it comes fast and furiously. At least, so it seemed the earlier part of the night, before the long tortured hours had begun to behave like wolves gnawing at the parts that must be amputated. You would get along without a leg. Had to! You would get along without Kitty. Had to! Both parts to be amputated.

Dammit, if there was one thing you didn't do, you didn't snivel. If the pain in your leg and the pain in the box where you kept your heart seemed to tear the very guts from their moorings, you took it as it came. Dammit though, came times when she sat there alone, suffering, when the impulse to empty the whole blamed bottle of the tablets into her hand and clap them into her mouth was an impulse so fearful and wonderful that it rushed at her, whoopee, like a train off a motion-picture screen!

Wrapped in the immense bath-towel robe (for which she held exclusive American agency rights, from the Karlsbad firm that manufactured them), she settled herself in the straight chair beside her bed, propping her leg, lighting a cigar and reaching for her knitting.

"It's the goddam nights," was her nearest approach of com-

plaint to her doctors. "At three o'clock in the afternoon a pain in the leg is a pain in the leg. At three o'clock in the wee morning a pain in the leg is a pain in the gizzard, a pain in the entrails, a pain in the heart. At three o'clock in the morning, it's not only a pain, it's a hydrophobia of the soul. An old wench in the dead of her night, needing God—that's me. An old wench in the dead of her nights, needing—to be needed—needing—and fumbling and mumbling. An old wench in the dead of her night——"

Settling back against her straight chair in order to brace her leg more firmly against the stool, the Charlottenburg snapped her night light, folding herself into darkness.

These nights! Dread of them had a habit of creeping into the smallest interstices of her crowded days. Surrounded by young people at a rehearsal, at Gala Club, or in the midst of a business conference or committee meeting, her mind, like a train rushing out of sunlight into a black tunnel of premonitions of the night ahead, would suddenly take on its load of dread. The nights!

She was in for one of them now. Cyclones of pain, released from the caves of day, tore at her.

The copy of *Primer on the Reading of the Mass*, which Father Macklin had given her, lay on the night table beside the bed. For nights she had been groping for the impulse to begin her study of it. Reaching out, her hand felt for the volume. Halfway, it paused and instead she began to knit in the darkness, the red end of her cigar gleaming along the needles.

For years before this period of the terrible harassment of pain she had used their click to induce drowsiness. No go, any more. The pain shoved up out of her knee and seemed to stab into her chin, and on through it, through the roof of her mouth, upward—until seated there at her own bedside knitting, she felt the burning of herself, alive——

There was a small rubber cork at the bottom of her knitting bag, and a further supply of them standing in a row on her medicine shelf. Sometimes she reached the stage of placing one of them between her teeth and biting down with every ounce of strength. It was a dreadful device coined out of her need to allay her impulse to bite into the flesh of her own arm. When pain reached that stage——

Damnably strange, but incalculably blessed it would be with-

out this fiery furnace of a leg. After all, merely a part of her gone on ahead to dust. The decay which starts in all at the hour of birth was now galloping through her. She was the rider. A Buddha on horseback. She gave a grunt of laughter into the darkness into which the cigar end glowed, and the needles clicked.

Squirming with the immediacy of these blasts of her night pain, she tried this business of praying. No go. God somehow needed to be as luminous as the cigar end in the dark. And that was the power and the glory of the Church. The Church brought Him in all His paraphernalia of the King of Kings, before your very eyes—faith brought him——

She needed that kind of elementary induction into the power to pray.

I'm an old woman who has got to die. I'm an old woman who is ashamed to ask for a last-minute introduction to God. Help me, Father Macklin. Work me, sweat me, teach me to toil my way into the Church.

She could hold out against these bonfires of night pain until the power to clamp down on the cork ran from her. Then the conflagration seemed to rage through the bony structure of her face upward to her brain, downward through her very bowels. Then, and not before, did she again succumb to the full allotment of the tablets on her night table.

Gradually to feel her perceptions dulling and slipping from her alert control was a species of pain that in some respects was as hard to bear as the burning at the stake of her flaming leg. It was as if, to the shrieking of brakes, a machine had slowed down against every high-power instinct.

"I'm built like a skyscraper. Don't treat me like a bungalow," she admonished her doctors. "Mother used to have to give me double doses of everything from castor oil to oatmeal. It even takes more to make me suffer than it does most people, and don't begin to tell me a lot of technical nonsense about my threshold of pain. Threshold of pain, my hind foot! The plain simple fact is, I'm Battleship Mary."

Immersed in her darkness, the battleship shuddered through her stormy night, teeth clamped over her cork, head lowered like a dipping prow.

Pain was as lonely as the nights of this house of the virgins.

You suffered it within the separate entity of yourself. You hid it within you, as you hid your cancer, away from the knowledge of those closest to you, carrying it beneath your cloak, even denying the doctors full knowledge of its immense fury.

The cork gave but little, even under the pressure she brought down upon it; the marks of her teeth lay deeply in it.

She thought of Sierra, asleep. It was difficult to imagine the decay of that marble-like flesh. It was unthinkable that Sierra should ever go down to her death in a cancerous old ship of self. Sierra would die in her own immense stillness. Sierra would die one with God. In the midst of her stillness, Sierra would quietly stop breathing, free of the obscenity of pain. And the many who had been sheltered, enriched and comforted by her, would marvel that so much of the quiet beauty of her in life had been reflected in the quiet beauty of her death.

Thank God that Sierra would die like that.

Four o'clock! It had never been like this night, before. Never. And now she knew suddenly it would be like this every night until the end, whenever that.

Sweat popped from her pores and the cork rolled from between her teeth. She tried to move and a flash of something she had never experienced roared like a revolving steel blade in her chest, leaving her body drenched and panting as a racer's.

"Hell," she said, "this is too much of a good thing." Said it out loud, and tilted eight of the tablets into her palm, jerking her head back sharply as she popped them into her mouth and down into her without benefit of water.

She had always bragged a great deal about this feat of being able to swallow tablets without a liquid chaser. "Hell," she repeated, "and I've called a rehearsal for ten in the morning. The boys and girls will be waiting. God—forgive——"

The thud she made falling was heard by Kitty in her sleep, who recalled it the following day.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII

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THERE was a codicil to the Charlottenburg will, written eleven days before her death:

*In the event of death after my admission to the Catholic church, I desire burial from St. Patrick's Cathedral. Should it occur previous to that circumstance, I wish it to take place from either the church of my good friend, Dr. Aloysius Camden, or from the synagogue of my dear friend, Rabbi Ben-Horwitz. I pray that by the grace of God and the grace of the Catholic church, Father Macklin will read my burial service. Do not omit flowers.*

The showman in the Charlottenburg would have approved her funeral.

Detailed police, most of whom had been known to her personally, detoured pedestrians from the sidewalk before Dr. Camden's picturesque church, set in its precious patch of city lawn, and held back the crowds who gathered at the curb.

It was one of those diamond-bright winter days that give a brilliant kind of glitter to the air. The quick-flowing stream of the city seemed to slow and coagulate around the Gothic pile of the Little Park Church. One of its very meaningful figures was lying dead in state, inside the nave. The impersonal metropolis was being personal.

Most of the detailed policemen, whom she had called by first



or nickname, referred to her sorrowfully as a "good egg," or a "great dame," and swapped anecdotes of this figure so colorful in civic life. Many of the police now forming a cordon about her bier had at one time or another sat in her office-living room in Twenty-one East, enlisting her aid or advice, not only in matters pertaining to the force, either. Charlottenburg had boasted three godchildren, all begot of members of the metropolitan police force, and in her will had stipulated "five hundred dollars for each of my beloved godchildren: Anthony Ames Maguire, Charlotte Thomas, and Louise Charlotte O'Flaherty."

Here was a funeral that touched a city to its quick. The list of honorary pallbearers, drawn up by Kitty, included a governor, a mayor, present and past, the socially important, at least one outstanding name in every major industry and profession, as well as prelates, rabbis, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, and an ex-convict, Charlottenburg's chiropodist and friend.

It was what Charlottenburg, upon returning from the obsequies of a public person, had so often described as a "pomposity funeral."

It seemed to Sierra that Charlottenburg must be lying there on her flower-stacked bier, in the midst of her own "pomposity funeral," shaking with her silent kind of immense laughter.

Here was a funeral that rated headlines, a roped-off sidewalk, detailed police, deeply packed sidewalk onlookers, and packed pews.

"Looks as if she can't keep her face straight, any more than she could in life," remarked one of the policemen who had passed around the bier. "She was a great one for thinking pretty nearly everything could be laughed off."

Sierra kept thinking something of the equivalent of that. The Charlottenburg must be lying there in a huge sardonic coma, amused, ironic, the quirked lips belying the great, stilled heart. The mind simply could not fasten upon the actuality of the death of the Charlottenburg. Or the kind of death that had caught up with her. Thank God they out there did not know the kind. Not even Kitty knew. Sierra, who had found her in a mountain on the floor, had connived it this way, from autopsy to headlines, with a power that seemed suddenly to have come to her.

Beside her in the pew, the Ave Maria rolling over them, Sierra

could feel the small-boned body of Kitty shaking with its sobs as she clung to John Baldwin and cried her tears against his bare hand. Flanked on the opposite side by the dry-and-stricken-eyed Erna, whose hand she clasped, Sierra, also dry-eyed, sat in the midst of the soft sniffing noises of the pews occupied by prelates and aldermen, showgirls and politicians, judges, "Boys and Girls," dancers, diplomats, executives, storekeepers, garage owners, policemen, stage hands, relatives, beneficiaries, socialites, and watched the procedure of the burial rites of the Charlottenburg, from whose hulk even the loneliness had departed.

How strange that she, Sierra, so accustomed to deal in the dreadful plentitude of pain in others, had so little receptivity left for the impact of what had happened to her. The roaring fire of the Charlottenburg had gone out, and already it was chilly before the ashes were cold. A pre-Cambrian kind of chill, boggy as a fen.

Sobbed Kitty, digging her gloved paw into Sierra's hand, "She's gone. There was never anyone like her. There never will be."

Yes, that was her clay over which the fine resonant voice of Dr. Camden was intoning. That was her clay beneath the rolling notes of Ave Maria. That was her clay beneath the heavy scents of white flowers.

Eaten and corroded by her private pain, which she had guarded as jealously as the undertones of her own vast heart, the Charlottenburg had died in the kind of aloneness that, with all its going hearth fires, its good foods, its streams of visitors, characterized Twenty-one East. Eaten and corroded by her private pain, the Charlottenburg had died in the kind of aloneness that had never been penetrated by those whose lives she had so deeply penetrated.

There were Mary Haff Peck, and her husband, Dr. Martin Peck, seated hand in hand in a pew very near the bier. Ben and Bella Gelanzer who had reason indeed to mourn the going elsewhere of this mammoth friend. Elsie Tweed. A pew of six sightless and Charlottenburg-maintained students from a school for the blind. Lotta, a seamstress. An ex-convict chiropodist. Scores from Home House. Distantly related Amesess whom she had excoriated and supported. Recipients, all, of the many-sided abundance of the woman in the bier.

Father Macklin was speaking.

“—in those all-too-brief talks I had with Miss Ames, after she had impressed upon me her passionately earnest desire to equip herself to meet God, I was further impressed by the quality of mind and spirit revealed.

“‘I do not feel worthy, as I am now,’ she told me time after time in our talks. ‘I must not only be put through abstruse doctrinal training in order to qualify me to enter your faith, but you must help me through the spiritual labyrinths, Father.’

“God, in his infinite wisdom, did not choose to wait for her formal induction, but we know that she went to Him, worthy in spirit and intention.

“I remember talking to her one afternoon concerning those processes of mind and spirit which had brought her to the realizations which were directing her toward the Mother Church. She enumerated them very simply: ‘the need of peace; the need of surcease from loneliness; the need better to comprehend compassion; and the need of that closeness to God which seemed to nest in the spirit of so many who had found faith.’

“This woman, whose sense of responsibility and humor made her outstanding, loved youth, as the presence of so many young people here within this house of God will testify. Under cover of gruffness, she had long since established herself as a beacon light toward which young and old alike turned for the many benefits she had to give. Charlotte Ames was deeply concerned over what she termed the bankruptcy of the generations that follow in the ruinous wake of wars. Too deeply human not to understand the underlying causes of this spiritual poverty, too deeply human to rest content with it, she sought in her own rough-diamond fashion to instill ideals of high living into our young men and women, without, as she put it in her own inimitable fashion, spraying them over with the odor of reform. A lusty and fearless lady lived a lusty and courageous life among us. Vigorously corrective, relentless when she saw evil, idealistic, tolerant, Charlotte Ames, literally and figuratively, rode in the vanguard of womanhood. If the world lost a wife and mother in Charlotte Ames, it gained a mother-of-men in that different and wider sense ——”

In Sierra’s tired consciousness, the words, from there on, lost direction and became mere sound.

"I recall," went on the voice, "a visit to the home of Miss Ames during which a young woman whom she had once befriended called with her baby in her arms.

"Taking the child to her own lap, Miss Ames turned to the young mother and said, in effect, something like this: 'Be worthy of your little miracle, my child. God has kissed you.' It was one of the tenderest things I ever heard one woman say to another. 'Be worthy—God has kissed you.'"

What she actually had said, Sierra, who had also been present, remembered verbatim: Janey Kaye, one-time Europium dancer, had brought her first baby. Charlottenburg, who had a rough-and-tumble way with children, had clasped it to her. "God spits out these little miracles, one a minute. I wish He would spit on me. Be worthy of your little miracle, child, God has kissed you." There had been tears in her eyes. And so the priest had seen them too.

Ah, Charlottenburg —

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## CHAPTER XXXIV

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IN a yellow garden, so bright with Long Island sunshine that it looked flood-lighted, Mrs. John Baldwin, in lavender, with an immense lavender garden hat lying stagily on a stone bench beside her, turned the spigot of an electric percolator and let Quickie Coffee run into a cup the size of a cereal bowl.

In the yellow garden that Kitty had planned and executed down to the last canary in the aviary of them that sang by throaty dozens, it was a half-hour earlier than cocktail time. Beneath a wide awning stretching over three sets of French doors that led to the terrace from the dining room, a pair of maidservants in yellow and white uniforms moved about, outfitting a table with the equipment of highball glasses, cocktail shakers, Scotch, club soda, plates of fancy and fanciful hors d'oeuvre (yellow), ornate sandwiches and great silver bowls of celery, olives and strips of raw yellow carrot.

Stretched in a wicker chair, John Baldwin leaned forward to take the large cup from his wife's hands.

"By gad," he said, tasting and licking his lips, "it would take an expert to tell the difference between this and real coffee, and then I doubt if he could."

"Your nerves will know the difference, darling. And how do you like Mummie's large-size coffee cups? Mummie, in her quiet little way, is making them fashionable all around the Sound."

"It's a good measure of what I declare is as good a cup of coffee as I used to buy for a nickel, with sinkers."

"Here come your doughnuts now, John."

"Good Lord almighty, woman, how did you ever think up letting me have my sinkers?"

"Dunk 'em, Honey. Here, let Mummie dunk for you."

"By gad, I haven't dunked a sinker in forty years. Silver City sinkers had nothing on these Roslyn, Long Island babies."

"Johnnie, if I weren't an outrageously pampered wifie, I'd take over this Quickie Coffee in a big way and buy out my partners. Let's do it anyway, John, and give the profits to Sierra, for indigent this-or-thattas. It beats any substitute coffee on the market. Shall we take a chance on another ten thousand, and I'll do some lobbying around our swank neighbors and get someone like Terry Baker, or old lady Burbank, to put up a matching ten thousand? Kitty never backs the wrong horse, Johnnie. There's gold in this here substitute coffee. But now or never is the time to buy out my partners."

In the pause, while he stirred his coffee and a distant lawn mower hummed over grass that already looked slick enough to be painted there, she repeated softly, "Johnnie? Johnnie, is it yes?"

He glanced up with pale eyes that in the fifteen months of their marriage had also grown absolutely limpid with something more than contentment, and smiled with a row of not too perfect teeth which had replaced a five-year-old set that had once made his mouth glassy.

Here was a man who had relaxed suddenly into an old age that was as pleasantly warm as the sunlight which Kitty had seen to it lay warm as a rug across his legs.

Here was a man as remote from the lusterless iron-gray man deserted by Leonore as the yellow garden in which he lay sunning was remote from the blizzard that had overlaid it six months before.

With even defter touch than Leonore at her best, Kitty had mended his spirit.

A twelvemonth previous to this, John Baldwin would have told you that the perfection of the two-hundred-acre Long Island estate of Georgian manor house (originally built by sugar mag-

nate H. J. Sydenberg) with its geometric gardens, flowing lawns, boat houses, guest houses, hothouses, woodland, nine-hole golf course, was the last thing on earth he would want to acquire, absorbed as he was in simplifying, rather than elaborating, his existence.

Today, his delight in it, his interest in its gladiola bulbs, topsoil, bathing beach, backgammon courts, timber, swimming pool, oil burners, boat and plane landings, was that of a man in the midst, rather than in the late glow, of his life. So was his interest in the new Park Avenue apartment which had replaced the house in Murray Hill after it had been sold to the city for a medical school. Paradoxically, by taking on ballast, Baldwin seemed to have thrown over the ballast of those years of his life which had weighed him down.

What a woman! Take this very day. Offhand, it would seem to contain a routine that would be anathema to him. Not a bit of it. Rely upon Kitty for the dual achievement of planning his hours to his utter contentment and at the same time satisfying her vociferous appetites for the new power, the new wealth, the new security, variety and successes that had come to her with this marriage.

Kitty was letting herself go, but with her impeccable good taste, as always, her check rein.

Strangely, her social peregrinations, differing chiefly in subtlety as compared to those of the one-time plush-covered Mamie Baldwin of Silver City, never seemed to recall that earlier horrific period in his life.

"Don't know much about the Kitten's social judgments, bless her foolish heart," John once remarked to Sierra. "I suspect she's what you women would call a social climber. But let her climb. I'm here to catch her if or when she falls. But she's got a Wall Street mind and a housewife's instincts, and the combination seems to be horse sense."

As they sat in their yellow garden, all this and more was in his eyes as they regarded her over the top of his immense coffee cup.

"If you think so much of this coffeeless coffee, Kits, we'll go all the way and back you for the full twenty thousand."

"No, no, Johnnie. It's a good basket, but only half of our eggs

go into it. I'm going to need that other ten thousand for a property development that will put us in the real money, darling."

"What's the big idea in the little head?"

"It's so big, Johnnie, that Kitty can scarcely cram it all in. She got it only last night, when we were looking over those old Silver City photographs of yours. It's one of those inspirational flashes that come once in a lifetime. Charlottenburg used to call them my hell-bent moods, and this time I'm hell-bent for Silvertown!"

"Silvertown!"

"The entire deserted town can be bought up for a song, Johnnie! It's got a million-dollar climate and million-dollar scenery. It's near the main line, but with sufficient transportation problem to excite city slickers. I've my eye on that entire mountain behind the ghost town, Johnnie, for our own private retreat——"

"Now look here, baby——"

"Don't interrupt, Johnnie—anyway, not until you've seen the outline I've put on your night table next to your bed. I hadn't meant to bring it up at all until you'd seen it. But it just busted out. The idea is too big to stay in me, Johnnie. We're going to reconstruct Silvertown into a resort that will get the customers from both east and west of the Rockies. We're going to restore everything except the bad men and the fancy women. We'll reconstruct the Opera House, and have the best of Broadway come out to us. Casinos, as much gambling as the state will permit, even—even the Greasy Spoon, Johnnie, everything, except the grease, and perhaps the spoon. It isn't wrong for me to bring that up, Johnnie, is it?—I want you to relive what were happy days—then——"

"God, what—happy—days—then——"

"Our own four thousand acres out beyond the town, Johnnie, that old Imperial ranch you described to me last night, won't cost us a penny. And if it does, we should worry at our time of life. We can't take it with us when we go. So half the year we'll live Kitty's nasty little scheming social-climbing way. But the other half, we'll go all the way, your way, Johnnie! On a ranch where you can relive a period of your life that your eyes are



homesick for, and Kitty will dike herself up in jodhpurs and go every inch of the way along."

He looked as if something as alien to him as tears were on the verge of overlaying his eyes.

"Why, Kitten, I've never realized, up to these last few evenings, when we've been going over papers and photos of the old times, how tied up my very insides are with those days back there."

"Of course you didn't, Johnnie. That's what you have your Kits for, to realize it for you."

He kept patting her hand and regarding, with his about-to-tear eyes, the flowing vistas of clipped lawn, lawn furniture, bright umbrellas, distant blue water and white sails.

"I'm a man of few wants, Kitty—by nature——"

"I understand that in you so well, Johnnie, that I'm never going to forget it. You're never going to have to do one single thing you don't enjoy or don't want to do."

"This idea of Silvertown——"

"Don't let's talk any more now, Johnnie. There isn't time, and I want you to see my plans first. Besides, here's Jake to take you for your sail while Kitty goes social-climbing. There's going to be a cocktail party and eighteen in for dinner tonight, Johnnie. My once-a-week fling, you know. But Jake will bring you your tray to your room, and Kitty will sneak upstairs, between courses, to nibble a bite or two of her hubby's good-for-what-ails-him supper. Remember Johnnie, Kitty will never cheat. The Charlottenburg always said that about me, now didn't she?"

"She didn't need to, Kits."

"Your Kits may be snide and second-rate—it's the way she's built—but she'll be first-rate with the father of Sierra."

"You and Sierra are the only real first-rate things that have ever happened to me. And to think of you getting hold of the idea about Silvertown. I'd rather spend my last days back there than—than—God, what a woman, and she's mine!"

She kissed him on his thinning hair, her darting eyes alert the while to the movements of the servants, to Jake, approaching across the turf, to the arrangement of the table flowers, and to the driveway, where presently cars of arriving guests would begin to disgorge.

"It's time for your sail, Johnnie! Here is Jake to fetch you.

Ugh, it makes Kitty seasick even to think about it. There's a new surprise gadget on board for you. Jake will show you how it works. Poor Kitty went shopping for it, and almost got mal-de-mer-seasick watching the salesman demonstrate the thing. It's clever!"

"What a woman!"

With Jake and Kitty for anchorage, John hove out of his chair, and leaning rather heavily on his man, ambled off just as around the sweep of driveway appeared the first motorload of guests.

"What a woman! God bless her smart heart."

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## CHAPTER XXXV

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THE Charlottenburg had always maintained that the odor of philanthropy, characteristic of the endowed institution in general, and Home House in particular, was a combination of disinfectant, unairable corridors, damp towels and slow drain holes.

Even Home House, model for such institutions, smelled, she had insisted, more of House than Home. Yes, and that held true of the new eighteen-story annex of steel and concrete. Philanthropy will out, she had expostulated, sniffing through her one and only tour of inspection.

That, however, was due to an inalienable prejudice where the Annex was concerned, which stemmed from the tremendous drain this achievement had been upon every resource, physical, mental, and financial, at Sierra's command.

For a different set of reasons, most of them nostalgic, the original Home House building, of exposed plumbing, wooden floors, and high ceilings, remained Sierra's preference. There she still maintained her offices to which, since the passing of Twenty-one East, she had added an adjoining bedroom. It was one of those small architecturally leftover rooms, badly ventilated, hemmed in by the ell's of Home House and the gray brick rear of the building opposite.

But it afforded wall space for books, salvaged from the sale of

Twenty-one East, a procedure which had been hastened by the revelation that the Charlottenburg's estate, due to liabilities incurred by bad debts and enterprises in which she had thrown financial caution to the winds, scarcely more than met funeral expenses.

Overlaid with a pall of greasy smoke, electric lights, regardless of the color of the day, burned in this suite of inside rooms, causing the stifling summer air to dance and seem visible to the stinging eyes.

Except for the books, and a reading lamp that had been the Charlottenburg's, Sierra's small bedroom was identical, in everything but shape, with any one of the hundreds of bedrooms in Home House. With the exception of a pot of flowering azaleas, her occupancy left scarcely an imprint, the surfaces of the chest of drawers and dressing table remaining bare of accessories. Even her books, most of them as impersonal as the suite itself, seemed to help the room remain a cell: volumes of listed social agencies, welfare workers' manuals, Krober's *Anthology*, *Mind of Primitive Man*, *Races of Europe*, *Genetics and Eugenics*, *Age of Reason*, *The Golden Bough*, *Deserta Arabia*, *Seven Veils*, *Evelyn Immes*, a miscellany of poetry and belles-lettres, a map of the Island of Manhattan, the congested areas indicated by pins.

Occasionally it came over her as she moved about, going to bed in it, how sedative and compatible to her was this sparse environment, and how alien she had been, by temperament, to the planned and complicated pattern of Twenty-one East.

Sitting in this room one blistering August evening, waiting for Erna, who habitually joined her upon the conclusion of her secretarial workday in Home House office, the thought moved through her mind: What a strange trio we must have appeared back there in Twenty-one East, which now, only eighteen months later, seems more dream than reality.

She had known, of course, the bothersome implications which for years had dogged the three of them and which had come to bounce off her consciousness like so much evil sleet. And yet, of how much normalcy had they dared boast? And what was left of that modicum of normalcy, now that death and marriage had exploded the so-called home of Twenty-one East as if it had been

one of those trick structures you erect out of matches on the after-dinner table. A little phenomenon of a structure without foundations. A house of corridors that led into the barren chambers of barren women.

With the passing of the Charlottenburg and the marriage of Kitty, dousing the house in Twenty-one East had been as casual as clicking out an electric light. Grief, to be sure, but without nostalgia. Memories, to be sure, but lacking poignancy.

With the dropping of that curtain, the scene had been instantly cleared of the hearth that had pretended, of the imitation toys strewn by hired children. Play-acting finished, the building of neither roof tree nor foundation left little trace of itself, not even nostalgia.

The quiet of her little misshapen bedroom adjoining her offices in Home House brought all this sharply to Sierra as she waited for Erna to join her at the end of their day.

It was a comfort, having Erna—whose bedroom window in one of the flanking right-angle walls she could see by craning her neck—to share the new loneliness which could come swooping down upon her.

Going home to Twenty-one East at the end of a day had at least been adventure into new and animated ozone. The evenings at Home House, after days filled with their characteristic procession of the seekers and the weepers, were apt to close down suddenly, leaving an emptied kind of quiet.

It was a sharp transition for one too tense to relax readily into sedative evening occupations, to face suddenly, with nerves still tingling, a letdown of this nature.

Nowadays, if Erna was late, it mattered. It mattered surprisingly. It even mattered a little frighteningly. The voices of those needing her seemed to sigh into this kind of silence. The oppressing consciousness that under her very roof, on all sides about her, women who needed her were facing their fears and dreads and forebodings in the hundreds of cubicles, had the weight of sandbags.

Erna helped keep at bay the dreaded quality of the aloneness of these evenings. These long and quiet evening hours, after the last interruption from staff or resident, were usually productive of more clearance of correspondence than could be accom-

plished in a week of days when an almost endless procession of women with their various dilemmas passed through Sierra's clinic of an office.

Into these working evenings Erna also fitted gratefully. To her they were no match for what had been the panoramic schedules of Twenty-one East. But at least, in a life growingly devoid of outside relationships, they assured companionship of someone precious to her.

The years had managed to endow Erna with a modicum of something that had been completely denied her as a younger woman. Time had filled her out slightly, converting boniness into slenderness. The white eyes behind glasses, no longer the darting irritating eyes of an irritatingly nervous female, had focus to them. A slender, fairly poised woman, with pallid hair drawn at Kitty's insistence into a coil at the nape of her neck, entered Sierra's room nowadays with stenographer's book in hand and a certain tread of authority.

Implications bothersome to Sierra went with Erna's sudden and increasingly frequent failure to appear for this post-workaday period.

The implications were bound up with a long lanky male and with a pair of coincidences. By merest chance in both instances Sierra had seen this new and unidentified acquaintance emerge with Erna from a subway hood on one occasion. And on another, his spare silhouette had shown up very plainly against the drawn shade of the window in Erna's combination bed-and-sitting room in the ell which jutted at right angles from Sierra's quarters.

Waiting and hoping for Erna's arrival this evening, Sierra sat beside her window, head back against the framework, her eyes out over the vistas of gray brick walls, their windows already lighted, some with their shades not yet drawn.

Men and women moved across them. Lower-income families at their evening meal, reaching with shirt-sleeved arms, passing bowls of steaming food; children being rebuked and slapped into place; figures passing from kitchen stoves to tables; women slicing loaves of bread by clutching them to loose calico bosoms and sawing inward. Children at play. Children crouched over littered tables at school homework. The unfolding of folding beds. Children being undressed. The unprivacy of the poor. Young girls ap-

plying their fineries and slipping out of the home scene. Young men jamming on caps, the visors low over their eyes. Mothers engaged in the immemorial processes of dish-washing, sewing, and rocking children to sleep. Finally, the men squirming out of their suspenders, the women laying back bedcovers, men fumbling at buttons, the women opening bodices to reveal breasts that had suckled many young, the men dropping their trousers, the women patting pillows, and, finally, the women drawing down the shades ——

Sierra liked to turn away from her window before the drawing down of the shades.

There was something about the gesture of a woman, even in lackluster homes such as those across the way, coming to a window to snap down a shade in order to enclose her and hers in their rightful privacy, that lingered a while like a pain, as if the heart had been pinched.

Turning from the impending drawing of these shades, Sierra wished Erna would come. Obviously these gratuitous evenings with Sierra were no longer her sole alternative for a stagnant evening.

A new manner was overlaying Erna. An almost conspicuous avoidance of being alone with Sierra, a new constraint behind what she said and did.

Nowadays, instead of tinkering about the office while Sierra held last-minute conferences, Erna covered her typewriter and headed for unnamed destination. With a combination of amusement and what might be called despair, Sierra watched this wedge edge into their relationship.

During these eighteen months since the passing of Twenty-one East, practically all of their evenings, except those devoted to Sierra's public appearances here and there in behalf of Home House fund-raising drives, had been spent in this bedroom, catching up on mail. Occasionally they broke routine by attending a concert or motion picture, and on evenings when there was an overflow of interviews with Home House residents, Erna usually curled up with a book in the outer office, on the chance that afterward Sierra might be inclined to walk for an hour before bedtime.

Much became clear to Sierra, now, waiting. Erna's sudden and unwonted interest, so little characteristic of her, in the cases that

were Sierra's daylong considerations, must stem from this something new and personal in her own experience.

Case after case was suddenly Erna's concern now.

"Is it true, Sierra, that Kata Burns, in Room 134, has an illegitimate child in an upstate orphanage? How about Netta Scalisi, the Italian girl in 67, forelady in a flower factory, who is going to have a baby by her married boss? What do you do in a case like that? Tell me, Sierra. Tell me. Is it wrong for a woman like her to sin with a man whose wife will not give him a divorce? That changes everything, doesn't it? What do you advise them—to do? After all, it isn't their fault if they have fallen in love and he isn't free. There comes a time in such lives when people have to make terrible decisions and pay the consequences gladly, if there are any. Right and wrong! They aren't two rigid words. They move about so—they confuse—so ——"

These phrases sat strangely upon the threshold of Erna's tidy lips. They were the neat prim lips of a chaste woman. Was Erna in love with a married man? The elderly lank one who had come up out of the subway with her? A sapless fellow, dry as Erna herself, reminiscent, in fact, of Rolfe; and yet these two—there had been illumination across their dead faces. Sierra could have sworn that ——

In particular, this case of Netta, the Italian, and her married boss whose child she was about to bear, seemed to hold and torture Erna's attention.

"How do you meet that kind of problem, Sierra? She is going to have a baby, isn't she? Now isn't she? It's in her face. Poor thing. But she wins if she loses, doesn't she? She can't have any less than she has now? Love and a baby, any way you can get them, is—oh, surely God must see that a woman can starve for a baby the same as she can starve for bread—oh, I don't know. I get so confused ——"

Sierra knew the symptoms. The beating around the emotional bush before the eventual unburdening.

What had come over this monotone of an Erna?

Was Erna coming into belated realization that those years and years of basking in the reflected glory of the Charlottenburg had been only a place in a low-power sun that bore about the same



relation to light and heat that a gas grate, burning beneath colored glass coals, bears to a roaring wood fire?

Was this sudden and reiterated interest in the case-history files in Sierra's office born out of new developments in Erna's life?

Something strangely like the drop of a plummet into the depths of her heart happened to Sierra, sitting there with her head tilted back against the window frame, waiting.

Those steel filing cabinets in her adjoining office contained the living dramas, tragedies, and documentary evidences of the army of women who had passed through the years of Home House. Their lives were alphabetically under her fingers. She had guided them with every ounce of her steadfastness, high purpose and quality of mercy. The children and their bastards were her god-children. Their ovarian histories, their lovers, their employers, their shames, their prides, their finances, their obligations, their strength, their weaknesses were known to her with clinical precision.

Vicariously, through their years, she had lived their spotted, soiled, romantic, fulfilled, or frustrated lives.

Those steel cabinets were packed with the recorded tears and smears, hopes and agonies of women who had lived more fully than had she. Those steel cabinets were rows of canned human goods whose contents she had tasted only vicariously. There was work to be done with those lives in those files tonight, when Erna came. *If* Erna came.

Sometimes, in bed, it occurred to Sierra that these records, crawling with the chirography of the case histories of women in the midst of their lives and loves, made up the closest reality she had with living and loving. The cards slept in their alphabetical rows, but they lived.

Half after nine o'clock, and no Erna. Suddenly, sitting there waiting in the window embrasure, she saw with her tilted eyes a light spring up in Erna's third-floor window in the ell.

Immediately outlined were Erna and the lanky fellow with the long neck and the low collar. At once their faces and figures swam together in a long sensuous embrace, so sensuous that Erna's body curved backward and his over it, like a lid, fitting.

Long and slow, long and sensuous, it was as if Erna, feeling

the suction of Sierra's eyes against them, groped for the window shade, drawing it down.

Turning toward the room, Sierra drew down her own.

Thank God, there was work to be done with the lives in those files. Work. Work. Work. Thank God. Work. Work. Work.

THE END









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